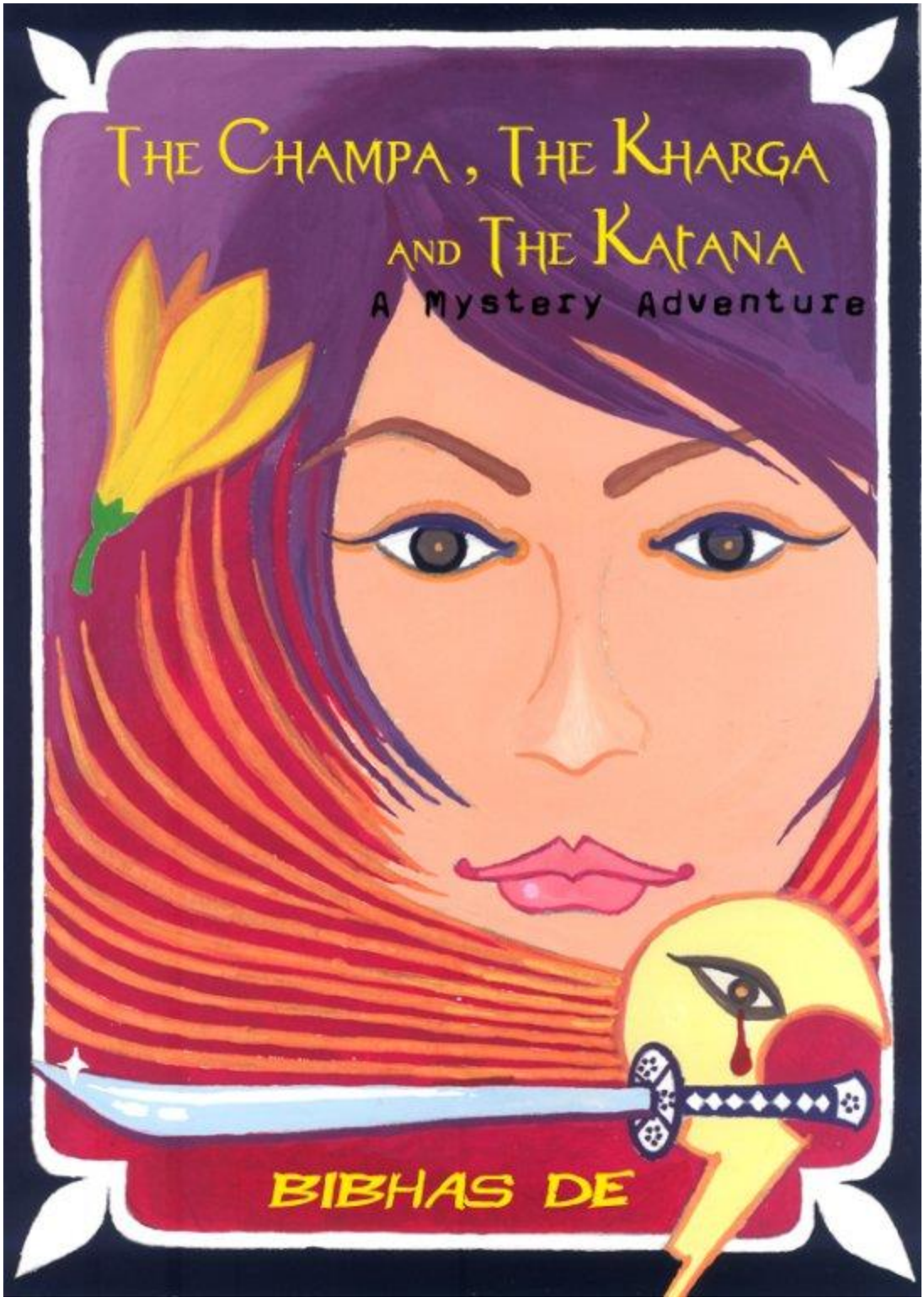
THE CHAMPA, THE KHARGA
AND THE KATANA
A Mystery Adventure
BIBHAS DE

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All other names, characters, events and plots are entirely products of imagination.

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CONTENTS

1. THE PORTENT
2. ON CONVERGENT PATHS
3. THE TALE OF THE CIGARETTE-SMOKING MONK
4. URVASHI RAHMAN
5. DEPUTY COMMISSIONER KHAN GETS AN IDEA
6. MEGHASWAMI IS PUT IN THE PICTURE
7. JUNGLE THOUGHTS IN VAIRENGTE
8. POLICE SUPERINTENDENT ZORAMTHANGA
9. COLONEL AURORA'S HAND SIGNALS
10. AT THE CIVIL HOSPITAL
11. HIGH TEA AT THE POLICE STATION
12. A STRANGER ARRIVES IN AIZAWL
13. CONTENTS OF THE TOP SECRET FILE
14. AN URGENCY DEVELOPS
15. THE EXPEDITION
16. VAJRANINAD'S NARRATIVE
17. DREAM OR NIGHTMARE?
18. THE VIGIL AT THE QUONSET HUT
19. THE HORROR
20. TWO HASTY CREMATIONS
21. INSPECTOR AICHHINGA MAKES A MISTAKE
22. THE THIRD AVENGER
23. THE DEVIL CONSIDERS A NIGHT OUT
24. THE DEBRIEFING
25. THE MILITARY POLICE LEARN NEW FACTS
26. THE CIVILIAN POLICE SOLVE THE CASE
27. A DINNER PARTY AT THE KHANS
28. A CLOSED-DOOR MEETING
29. THE LEAVE-TAKING
30. THE REGIMENTAL SATURDAY CLUB
31. CAPTAIN CARRUTHERS ARRIVES IN LONDON
32. THE FAILSAFE PLAN OF *SECTION YASHIKA*
33. THE STORY OF LADY WYNDMERE
34. THE NIGHT OF FATE
35. A LETTER FROM SAPNABHAIRAVI
36. THE BROTHERHOOD OF TWO LEAVES AND ONE BUD
37. THE LETTER FROM MAJOR SIMPSON
38. THE TEMPLE OF CHHIN'NOMOSTA
39. THE EMPIRE PARCHMENT
40. EYES
EPILOGUE

1

THE PORTENT

The Kali Temple deep within a nearly impenetrable jungle in this remote deltaic area of Bengal had something very special about it. Well, not the temple itself, but the image of the goddess. Her kharga, the broad sword with a menacing crescent moon shaped blade, was not made of tin foil as was customary. Instead, it was the real object, forged from the finest steel by a famed craftsman, and consecrated by none other than the head priest from Kalighat. It was about four feet long, compared to the five feet height of the image. The hilt was made of black steel, inlaid with patterns in gold threads. The hilt ended in an ivory knob carved in the shape of a lion's head which some thought looked like a large Japanese Netsuke. The sword was quite heavy, and the arm of the goddess that carried it had to be reinforced with metal braces. Since the temple itself stood under a Polash tree that bloomed out each season with flame-red flowers, the sword in time came to be known as Polashi Kharga - pronounced by the British as the Plassey Kharga. People came from far and wide just to have a glance at the kharga – said to be the seat of the power of the goddess, considered a fully awakened deity.

There were only ten permanent residents in the temple: Three priests, five helpers of various types and two women. The older woman cooked and cleaned and generally served as a mother figure. In return, she got room and board for herself and her young daughter.

Around about April of 1945, two British military officers hunting near the temple reported that they were harassed by the staff and the priests of the temple who, the officers said, had detained them for an hour and verbally assaulted them. This did not sit well with the British military authorities in Fort William. Two days later, at dead of night, a small contingent of five Indian soldiers led by a British Major approached the temple. The priests had anticipated something like this, and had watchmen posted in the jungle. When they got word of the impending assault, the High Priest called in a man from the staff. The priest removed the kharga from the deity's hand, touched it to his own forehead, and handed it to the man. The priest then gave the man some detailed instructions, and asked him to flee immediately, with the kharga. As an afterthought, the priest broke off a finger from the deity and gave it also to the man.

People learned about the details of that night from the above man, and also from a soldier that participated in the raid. This soldier – afraid of losing his job – told only a few people in strictest confidence. The story was then told and retold, without disclosing the original source. The assault took place with a volley of gunfire, and everybody that came out to defend the temple with sticks and brooms died. The older woman had come out flailing her bare hands, but was also cut down. The young daughter had been away that night, visiting relatives in Calcutta. Only the High Priest now remained alive, in the inner sanctum, with the goddess. The Indian soldiers were most reluctant to enter the temple house, but were ordered by the Major to follow him. The Major now entered the main worship room and looked at the deity. Then he saw the priest, and shouted: “Where is the bloody sword?”

Clearly, the Major had heard about the famed sword and probably wanted it for a trophy to take back to England. But the priest did not respond. At that, the Major flew into a wild rage, and toppled the image of the goddess. He started madly kicking the image with his heavy military boots, shattering the clay image to pieces. Then he asked again: “Where is the Plassey Kharga?”

Again, the priest did not respond. Now the Major floored him with one heavy blow to his head with the butt of his revolver, and then put his right foot on the priests chest. He pushed down hard, and some of the priests ribs broke with a crackling noise. But the latter did not speak or make any sounds of pain. The Major now aimed his revolver at the priests head and said: “For the last time, where is the sword?”

This time the priest spoke in a very feeble voice, blood spewing from his mouth: “The sword it is gone. But you will see it one more time. Just for one brief moment, before it slices through your neck. It will be someone you already know.”

“Bloody hell!” cursed the Major, and shot the priest in the head.

He then turned to the soldiers: "I want that sword. I must have it. First thing tomorrow morning, go to the village and ask around where this bloody priest might have sent the bloody sword. Find out about all his relatives and all his contacts. And use force if necessary to get information."

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A morning a couple of weeks later, the Major sat in his office in Fort William, Calcutta. For the entire time since the raid on the temple, the last few words of the priest had been working on his mind. He was no longer able to dismiss these words as Hindu religious mumbo-jumbo. Unbeknownst to him, a stark fear - nothing less than a fear of macabre death – had been taking hold of him, slowly. And when a fearless man starts to sense stark fear, it somehow becomes even starker. As the Major was brooding darkly on the events of the night of the raid, one of the soldiers who had accompanied him that night came in and saluted.

The Major looked up at Havildar Haldar, who really would have preferred to be addressed by his equivalent English title, Sergeant Haldar. For he looked half-British, an Anglo-Indian. Although his complexion was that of a fair-skinned Bengali, he was tall and broad-shouldered compared to the small-framed Bengali. His eyes were nearly blue, almost never seen in a Bengali. His frame was more like that of the Major. He had exceptionally square jaws, more so than even the Major's square jaws that were like those of Mountbatten. All of these gave the Havildar a rather distinctive, even striking, appearance.

The Major seemed greatly dependent on Havildar Haldar. They had worked together in Aizawl, and when the Major came to Calcutta, he brought the Havildar with him. The Havildar now handed the Major a piece of paper as he said: "Sir, we found out that the priest has a brother who is also a worshipper of Kali. Here are his name and address."

"Good work, Havildar Haldar. One more thing. Do you know any good palmists?"

The Havildar was taken aback. But he thought for a moment and said: "Sir, my mother's Gurudev is a very highly respected jyotishi, a spiritual teller of the future. I can talk to him if you are interested in seeing him."

"No, I want to see him without him knowing anything at all about me. So let us go right now, and catch him cold."

In about an hour, the two men arrived at an ashram near Dakshineswar. The Guru was seated on an altar in the front court of the ashram, under a spreading banyan tree. The Havildar fell prostrate before him and made his obeisance, but did not speak. The Major spoke: "Guru, I would like you to read my palm."

The Guru signaled for him to sit on a low stool, and took both of his palms in his own hands. He considered both palms simultaneously, looking from one to the other for several minutes. Then he said: "It is not advisable that you have your palm read."

"Thank you for your advice but I would like to know what you have read. Do you see a wedding in the near future?"

"I do not see a wedding."

"How can that be?! I am firmly engaged to be married. That tells me that all this fortunetelling is a lot of mumbo-jumbo."

"I can only tell you what I read in the palms."

"Fair enough. What do you read in the palms?"

"Saheb, you will die soon."

"What do you mean I will die soon," the Major eyed his own finely chiseled, robust and athletic young body, "Do I look like a person about to die?"

"I can only tell you what I read in the palms. It is written here that you will die of an unnatural cause."

"What cause?"

"That is not in your palms. But if you will be patient, I will try to see if I can get any mental images."

The Guru closed his eyes and the Major sat silently. After some ten minutes, the Guru opened his eyes and spoke: "This is not making any sense. I only get the image of your bare chest, and several tumor-like growths on it. They look like the colorful glass marbles children play with. I have never heard of any such disease."

"You are right. This does not make any sense. It is nonsense, like the rest of your prediction."

"I very much hope so, Saheb."

The Major left some money in front of the Guru and returned to his vehicle. He felt very weak in the knees and sat heavily. He looked around him. He felt his revolver holster. He asked his driver to drive very carefully, and watch the traffic. Then he turned to Havildar Haldar and said: "How successful are this Guru's predictions?"

"Sir, in matters of death he has always been successful."

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That same evening the Major sat in his office. There he felt safe, for all around that interior room were always plenty of people noisily going about their business - day and night. But this evening, even that knowledge did not seem to help. He felt afraid, very afraid. He felt numb. He felt he could not move, not even twitch a finger. Then, with great effort, he reached inside a bottom drawer and brought out a file marked "Maj. Simpson: Personal". He opened it, and after looking through the sheaf of papers, brought out a telegram - the kind with white typed ribbons of paper pasted on a yellow printed form and read it:

FROM INFORMATION DIRECTORATE GHQ INDIA
TO MAJHSSIMPSON ASSAM RIFLES AIZAWL

THIS IS IN REPLY TO YOUR QUESTION STOP QUOTE KESA GIRI UNQUOTE IS A JAPANESE SAMURAI METHOD OF KILLING A MAN WITH A SINGLE SWEEP OF SWORD CALLED KATANA STOP VICTIM IS SLASHED WITH DIAGONAL SWEEP STARTING FROM HIS LEFT SHOULDER EXITING NEAR THE RIGHT OF WAIST STOP NORMALLY BODY IS NOT FULLY SEVERED BUT MOST VITAL ORGANS ARE CUT THROUGH END

Now the Major reached for his official letterhead for Indian Army, Fort William, and started to draw on it with a pencil. He drew the frontal outline of a naked man. Then he took a red pencil, and drew a diagonal line from the man's left shoulder to his right waist. He tore off the sheet of paper from the pad and stared at it long. He now laid it back down on the pad, and taking the same red pencil, drew a horizontal line through the neck. Even as he drew this picture with pencil strokes he felt as though he were etching it in his memory with a pointed knife.

The Major picked up the red pencil again, as if he had forgotten something. He then drew a group of tiny dots all over the chest astride the diagonal red line. He considered the finished sketch again. From here on this picture would stay with him every waking moment and come to him in dreams and nightmares.

The Major folded the sketch twice and put it in his wallet. He then called in his night clerk and told him to make arrangements for the Major to go to Delhi the following morning. He started to walk across the empty field to his living quarters. It was quite dark and no one was around in the field at this hour of night. As he made his way, a question that was shaping for some time in some deep recess of his mind came to the fore: Which method would it be?

Suddenly the Major stopped in the middle of the field. His knees could hold him no more. He sat down on the grass, shaking uncontrollably. The thought that never came to him before came now: What if all three means were administered simultaneously?

He looked around him, and it seemed to him as though there were something - some moving thing, even two moving things – within the palpable darkness. They were defined by even darker structures of dark. The moving things now positioned themselves in his front and back. To his great relief, two loud and inebriated soldiers came along at that moment, going his way and singing boisterously:

Its a long way to Tipperary
To the sweetest girl I know!

The sound of loud drunken singing had never been more welcome to the Major. He joined them.

2

ON CONVERGENT PATHS

On August 15, 1945 on a forested hill outside Nagasaki, a tall man sat inside the temple of Amitabha Buddha, the Buddha Amida Nyorai. He sat cross-legged in the lotus position, with his spine perfectly straight, not showing any signs of his 80 years of age. He was wearing loose white clothes of a Samurai, and his long sword was lying in its scabbard next to him on the floor. There was nobody else anywhere in sight. With his eyes closed, he kept swaying back and forth and chanting hypnotically: "Amida Amida Amida ..."

Presently a young woman carrying a bouquet of flowers and votive candles appeared. She sat down by his side, joined her palms and did obeisance to the Buddha. The man opened his eyes and addressed the woman: "I have long been looking for a sign from the Awakened One. I think you are that sign, for you have appeared out of nowhere and chosen to sit next to me in this large empty hall. I will tell you my story. Please tell me what I should do now."

The woman listened to the full story attentively. Then she spoke: "No, you cannot perform seppuku. First of all, what has happened to you is not your fault. However, there can be no doubt that this will catch up with you. Today you are still in apparent good health, and in full possession of you mental faculties. But this may not be the case much longer. When this horrible event you have been exposed to catches up with you, you may prove to be a danger to others around you. Therefore, I suggest that you take yourself to some very remote place where you can survive by yourself, and not need any human contact. And wait for blessed death to come to you."

"What will happen when I start to feel ill?"

"You will lose your human qualities, and your survival instincts of the jungle will make you more animal-like. You will not know the difference between good and evil, compassion and cruelty. And for a time, even as your mind fails, your body may grow stronger and more agile. That is what will make you an extreme danger to the society. That is why you must remove yourself now."

"But where would I go?"

"Think back on your life. Did you not just tell me that there was a place far from human habitation that you had not so long ago taken to your heart?"

"Yes."

"And do you not have some unfinished business there?"

The man looked startled. He said: "I am greatly torn between my Samurai creed and my devotion to Amida. This conflict is eating my inside all day every day. Do I take up violence again, or do I surrender myself completely to the serenity of the Buddha?"

"Well, go there and find your answer. And if you do bad things and realize that in a moment of clarity, ask for the forgiveness of the Buddha and take your own life then. May Amida in his infinite compassion bless you."

She then reached inside her garment and brought out a tiny box made of metal. She gave it to the man, saying: "Inside this box is a Jade Buddha. Keep this on your person always, and always keep it in its box. This was found on a person at Ground Zero, who miraculously survived. This will save you from all harm, and all others from coming to harm by your hand. Hold this well."

The man took the object in his two hands while bowing to the woman. The lid was tight-fitting, so he pried it open with the blade of his sword. While keeping it in the box, he turned the Jade Buddha over to admire its fine craftsmanship. As he did so, the woman suddenly moved away from him as if to get up to leave. At that moment the man saw a round spot on the back of the Buddha and looked at the woman questioningly. She said: "A hole was made to insert a relic of the Buddha, and then sealed. It is a very special object with very special powers. Please close the lid immediately.

"Now remember, when you arrive there, you will stand out in that small, one-street town. You will almost certainly be detained and interviewed by the military police. You must tell them your story completely and truthfully. This is the most important part: They must hear of the atrocities against the four teenage boys from you. They must know that you are the just avenger. You will show them your instrument of revenge, the great Kihei Katana. Then you will extend an invitation to your quarry to come and meet you."

"But I do not know any languages other than Japanese. How can I properly tell them my story?"

"Surely they will find an interpreter there who will help you set out your story properly. The account must be given powerfully enough to cause an official investigation, so that the world may know."

The man now touched the Buddha box to his forehead. He thought for a second where to keep it, and then looked at the small ivory box and a clasp he had hanging from his sash. He tried and found that the lead box fitted neatly within the ivory box, leaving very little space. He looked at the woman and smiled. The woman said: "Your Netsuke-and-Inro will now be as important as your sword."

The man suddenly remembered to ask: "What is your name, beautiful young lady?"

"I am Sumiko Yajima."

So saying, she left the bouquet of flowers at the feet of the Buddha, lit four candles and four incense sticks, and left. The man kept staring hypnotically at the four candles. The flames kept taking the unsteady shapes of four young boys, and then breaking up. He now knew.

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Those who were in the know thought nothing of the unusual sight of a Major of the Indian Army barging into the office of the Viceroy in Delhi without any appointment. The Major was somebody special. He was betrothed to a close member of the royal family. Also, his father had been a Governor of Bengal. Everybody knew that the Major was paying his dues in India, and would soon return as a hero of the Empire and would be addressed as Your Lordship. If the Major wanted something, he did not bother talking to his military chain-of-command, but simply had a word with the Viceroy. The chain-of-command, in the event, had no real choice.

This was now May of 1945. The Major walked straight into Lord Waverly's inner office, and instead of saluting, extended his hand. The Viceroy stood up and shook his hand warmly and the two sat down - not at the Viceroys imposing official desk but on plush sofas arranged in one corner of the office. Tea was ordered. After the exchange of elaborate pleasantries the Viceroy said: "We are very proud of your bravery in putting down that Kali Temple rebellion in Bengal. I am sure the Army will find a more concrete way to thank you."

"Thank you, Your Lordship, I was merely doing my job. Sir, as you know, I am in military intelligence. I want to ask for an immediate transfer back to Aizawl. I will be still in the Bengal Command, but working more closely with the military police unit Assam Rifles. Aizawl in Lushai Hills, as you know, is a militarily sensitive area being close to the Burma border through which the Japanese are relentlessly probing. The situation is becoming even more complex with the tremendous influx of refugees fleeing the war. Also from there I could cover the Silchar and the Sylhet areas that are potentially explosive because of the religious mix. I think this would be a good experience to round out my tour of duty in India."

Lord Waverly said, jovially and conversationally: "It seems to me that you are giving me all kinds of reasons but the most obvious and the most glaring one for that particular region: The activities of Subhas Chandra Bose against the Empire!"

The Major flinched. But he quickly responded: "That goes without saying, Sir."

"Now, what about Capt. Carruthers? Does he want to move also? I thought you boys liked to stick together."

"Actually, Sir, Carruthers is in Aizawl. He wanted to come to Calcutta with me, but I told him this would probably be a brief sojourn. So we will be together again in Aizawl, with your permission."

"Of course you can move back to Aizawl," said Lord Waverly, "if that is what you want. My only concern would be about your personal safety. As you know, the Palace holds me responsible for your welfare."

"Actually, Sir, I think I will be quite safe. Now that the Indians assume we are on the way out, they do not want to do us any harm. They do not want to cause any trouble that will delay our departure. And furthermore, Aizawl is a very familiar place for me. I came to Calcutta only recently, largely to look into the Kali Temple affair. That is now behind us. So I am simply returning to my base so to speak."

"Yes, now that you bring it up, I remember the recent story of your great bravery there where you vanquished a group of fierce Japanese commandoes that had set up a spy base, right inside India. That was your first military decoration, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Your Lordship."

"All right then. You may leave for Aizawl anytime you wish. I will square this with GHQ India. Now, enough shop talk. Let us have some tea. How are your mother and Sir Henry? Are they missing Bengal?"

"My mother makes an acceptable version of Bengali curries that my father so likes. My father, I rather think, misses the heady days when he governed the unruly Bengal. But he belongs to this club which he enormously enjoys."

"Ah, I have heard about the Regimental Saturday Club. I hope the old boys will save a place for me when I return."

"Oh, they would be ecstatic to have Your Lordship join. I understand they often reminisce there upon the Governor's House in Calcutta. I was born there and lived there only until I was four, but even I have clear memories of that opulent historic place."

"Indeed! And now you are all grown up. Speaking of that, where is the royal wedding to be?"

"They are thinking of Sandringville House."

"A very good choice."

After the tea the Viceroy walked to his desk, opened his cigar humidor and extended it to the Major. The Major declined, saying: "No, thank you, Your Lordship. But that box looks much like the one in the PM's private study!"

As soon as he said this, he realized he made a very careless mistake - the same type of careless speech in the past that had doomed him. The Viceroy responded with great surprise: "You have been in the Prime Minister's home?!"

The Major quickly repaired the potential damage: "Oh no. I saw a picture of the box in a newspaper."

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In May of 1945 a Kapalik a monk-devotee of the goddess Kali appeared in Sylhet. He had all his possession in a knapsack, and in addition, carried a thin, about four feet long package wrapped in burlap and tied. He found a small abandoned hut near a ghat of the river Surma and temporarily took up lodgings there. The same day he arrived he went to the colony of the artisans, and asked them to make him a five feet high statue of the goddess Kali. He told them some story, and they agreed not only to do it for free but also to do the finest job they could. The Kapalik gave them a broken finger from a clay image, and asked them to incorporate this into the new image, for continuity's sake. He further gave them some instructions about reinforcing the arm that would hold the kharga which he said he would provide.

When the Kapalik returned to his lodgings he saw in the ghat - the river landing – a young woman fetching water. When she turned, he was stunned to see how incredibly beautiful the woman was. She carried a flower basket in her left hand and the bucket of water in the right. When she saw him, she smiled most radiantly. Then they started to talk.

It turned out that she was an orphan who lived alone in the village. The Kapalik said: "How can this be?! You should be married to a prince, and living in a palace in Rajasthan. People should be worshiping the very ground you walk on."

The woman again smiled that sweet smile. From then on, whether by design or otherwise, the Kapalik happened to be there everyday exactly at that hour, and the woman turned up with clockwork precision. Soon their conversation began to get more and more personal. But there were days when the Kapalik had to go and meet with the artisans, and thus had to miss the tryst. When he would return, he would find a single fresh champa flower left on the stoop of his hut. He cherished it, and kept it in the breast pocket of his saffron kurta close to his chest - until it withered. The fragrance of the champa to him was the disembodied presence of the woman.

Watercolor by Sanchari De ("Puja"), Age 13

One day the woman asked if Kapaliks were allowed to marry. Most surprised, the Kapalik explained to her the concept of a Bhairavi - the spiritual-physical-otherworldly consort. Without any further ado the woman asked to be his Bhairavi.

The Kapalik was astonished. He thought of the example of an exquisite young beauty willingly taking up with an old beast. He composed himself and said: "I would not have dreamed in a thousand years that someone like you could take up with someone like me. But I accept you not only as my Bhairavi but also as my second goddess. I will place you on a pedestal only slightly lower than Kali's, and worship you the rest of my days. I will give you the most beautiful and the most appropriate name I can imagine: Sapnabhairavi, the Dream Bhairavi."

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In the broad terrace of a palace somewhere in England two young women of nearly the same age sat talking companionably. But the age probably was one of the few things they had in common. One of them was a British royal personage, the other was an Indian woman wearing a colorful sari. The latter had been a part of this family since she was a few years old. She never took up wearing western clothes and nobody ever asked her to. The royal lady was now saying: "My dear sister, while I must admit that I am a little envious, I am infinitely more pleased that you have tracked down your blood sister in India after so many years."

"Thank you, Your Highness. Without your help I could never have found her present whereabouts. I would like to start for India immediately and find her, if Your Highness will permit. I believe the journey itself takes a long time."

"Of course you should go. With all our good wishes and blessings. And when you have finished visiting, come back to us. The journey should not take long at all. I have already arranged for you to go in one of the military aircraft that routinely fly to Delhi. From there they will put you on another aircraft to Calcutta and Silchar. From Silchar you will travel by land to Aizawl. They have hewn out a rugged highway through some of nature's most wild and hilly terrain. Incidentally, it is quite a coincidence that the Major is now posted in Aizawl!"

"I know! That is absolutely wonderful! I will drop in on him unannounced and surprise him."

"As to your other request about traveling alone, I have made some enquiries. The Secret Intelligence Service advises that you not go roaming about the hills of India on your own. I am afraid you will have to accept some security. I have been advised that it would be better to send with you an officer of the Gurkha Rifles than a white British agent. Whereas that officer would blend in with the scenery, the agent will stand out. So Subedar Major Sherbahadur Gurung will accompany you from here all the way to Aizawl and bring you safely back. He participated in the Burma Campaign, but is now training with the SIS. I have received assurances that he is a very fine professional. If there is any need for help, he will know who to contact. And GHQ India has been advised of your visit."

"Your Highness, I cannot thank you enough."

"You are my sister. I will go to the ends of the Earth for you. I only wish that I could meet your birth sister also. Well, establish the first contact. Then we will bring her over for a visit. We will have a glorious time.

"Another thought occurs to me. Perhaps while in India you could try to find a clue to what this recurring nightmare you have been having all your life means, if it means anything - a tiger pacing around a headless goddess."

"That is very much my hope also, Your Highness. I am blessed that you care so deeply for me."

3

THE TALE OF THE CIGARETTE-SMOKING MONK

Siddhartha Gautam Banerjee was the dearly-loved only child of wealthy parents in Sylhet, and lived in a spacious house in Chalibandar. His family owned teagardens near Srimangal. Siddhartha had a normal childhood and a normal youth, and in time, graduated with a Bachelor's degree from the college in Sylhet. He went to Calcutta for two years and obtained his Master's degree in Philosophy - specializing in Eastern philosophies and religions. He then returned to Sylhet. But by this time a gradual transformation had come upon him. Like his namesake, the Buddha-to-be, he started asking questions about the impermanence of life. Soon he started visiting places such as the Ramakrishna Mission and Shahjalal's Darga. In the Mission he sat and listened to Vedic hymns, and in the Darga, he watched throngs of pigeons frolic. In the end, he asked to join, and was allowed to join, the monastic order of Sri Ramakrishna. He formally renounced his earthly family as he was required to, causing great pain to his parents. His father would not recover from this shock, and would die within two years.

So profound was Siddhartha's spiritual devotion and so untiring was his fervor for service to man - the two main characteristics desired of a monk of his order - that his novitiate period was short. He quickly gave up the white attire of a Brahmachari, and donned the saffron clothes and cap of a Swami. He answered to the name of Swami Megharupananda - a name that could be roughly translated as the joyfulness that is in the shapes of clouds. Even as a young monk he was greatly respected and admired by his brethren for his mild nature and deep erudition. He took particular interest in studying the spread of Buddhism in the world and especially how it was practiced in China, Japan and Tibet. All was thus well now except that Siddhartha's mother was heart-broken. Having lost her husband and also in a way her only child, she could no longer stand to live in Sylhet. She moved to Silchar where she had other relatives.

One evening as the Swami was taking a reflective walk along the banks of the large pond called Dhopa Dighi, the Washerman's Pond, he came across a saffron-clad Kapalik and his Bhairavi. Instinctively, both parties stopped - face to face. There was an awkward moment of silence. Then the Kapalik made the introductions. He said his name was Vajraninad, and introduced his companion as Sapnabhairavi.

The Swami was immediately fascinated by the names. Vajraninad, the Voice of Thunder, did indeed have a deep sonorous voice. It was incongruous with his small built. And Sapnabhairavi, Dream Bhairavi, looked nothing less than a vision in a lovesick poet's dream. She was as beautiful as any cinema actress, as poised as Queen Victoria, and as serene as the goddess Durga. A further touch of grace was brought to this vision by the basket of fresh flowers she had culled. "She is completely out of place here," thought the Swami as he surveyed her very plain-looking, bearded companion with spindly legs, in shabby body rags. This must be truly a spiritual union, pure and pristine and beyond all base earthly considerations - the Swami further thought. The Swami bowed his head slightly to the man and deeply to the woman. The woman offered him a single champa flower from her saji, the flower basket. The Swami accepted this with another bow.

They started to converse as the Swami reversed his direction and walked along with them. He was most intrigued by the few bits of philosophical utterances by the Kapalik in this encounter. He found out where they lived, which was at the edge of town, beyond Dariapara. Vajraninad had set up a temple there with donations from local devotees of whom he now had quite a few. In the temple was a five foot tall image of goddess Kali.

After this meeting, it slowly came to pass that the Swami visited them frequently, and became more and more engrossed in what the two had to say about man's place in the universe, and the universe's place in man. The Swami found that he felt a little sad if, on a rare occasion, Sapnabhairavi was not home when he visited. He then came away with a feeling of painful emptiness.

The Swami also noticed that the kharga in the hand of Kali looked remarkably real. He asked Vajraninad about this. The latter then told him the entire story of the Polashi Kharga and how he came to inherit it. He said that the messenger who brought him the kharga also brought a message from his brother: Be a good custodian of the kharga, and do nothing else. It will find its own avenger.

The Swami noticed that one fixture at the temple was an Englishman named Maj. Simpson. The Swami found the Major's constant presence there rather disconcerting. But Vajraninad sensed this and explained. One day Sapnabhairavi was returning from the market in Bandar Bazar late, and it had got dark. Suddenly, the Major's Jeep pulled over. The Major said it was not safe for a lady like her to be out alone at this hour, and drove her home. After that he started coming daily, saying that he was interested in learning about Hinduism and the cult of Kali. Although the Major was headquartered in Aizawl, after meeting Sapnabhairavi he started to spend most of his time in Sylhet. Vajraninad thought it was good that the Major wanted to learn about Hinduism. Sapnabhairavi seemed uncomfortable with the Major's constant presence but yielded to Vajraninad's big-hearted accommodation of the Major.

But of course people talked. Here was an incredibly beautiful woman, and here was a high-ranking British officer spending all his time in a Hindu temple. And this of course was a big problem also with the Swami's Order. Not only was the Swami listening to Vajraninad's philosophies that had not been passed upon by the Order, but he was also commiserating with people living an unorthodox lifestyle. The senior monks eventually broached the subject to the Swami, apologetically and with great tact. They said that these visits had to end, and if they did, no harm had been done.

Upon this, a great many conflicting thoughts crossed the Swami's mind. His dead father's image came to mind. His mother's loving face came to mind. The unconditional love with which Vajraninad and Sapnabhairavi received him came to mind. The unlikely union of these two came to mind. In the end, all these conflicting thoughts were reconciled when the Buddha came to mind. The Buddha, he felt, would approve of his ways. The Swami made his decision.

He left the Order and joined his mother in Silchar. The lady was overjoyed, and devoted the rest of her life taking care of her grown-up son. Two things Siddhartha continued from his days in the Order. First, he continued to wear saffron, shave his head and see himself as a monk. Second, he remained celibate. Other than these, he adopted the life of a normal householder. And one habit he resumed from his student days - smoking. His mother was progressive enough to let him smoke in her

presence. However, she implored him not to smoke cheap tobacco. She was under the impression that it was cheap tobacco that was bad for health. So the Swami always smoked Capstan cigarettes which he bought in tins of 50 pieces each. The Silcharites who knew and socialized with him got used to this sight: The Swami would step into your living room, sit himself down on the sofa, and place his tin of cigarettes and a matchbox on the coffee table. Then the proceedings would unfold with supplies of tea and snacks from the hostess, interspersed with puffs of Capstan cigarettes.

Obviously, the Swami could no longer use his moniker Swami Megharupananda. He explained that to people. So they started referring to him as Meghaswami. And of course everybody continued to address him as Maharaj, the customary grandiose address for a Hindu holy man that actually meant the King Emperor. The Swami remained in excellent terms with the Ramakrishna Mission and frequently helped them with large donations.

After moving to Silchar the Swami missed Vajraninad and especially Sapnabhairavi - intensely. Not being able to see the latter created a great void in his heart. But he decided to do monastic penance by not contacting them again. He wanted to test himself. He wanted to be worthy of being called Maharaj.

4

URVASHI RAHMAN

The first day of September 1946 was a Sunday. The Swami had finished his breakfast and was now sitting in the living room with his newspaper, the third cup of tea and the second cigarette. His mother was conferring with the cook on the menu for the noon rice. At this time there was a knock on the door.

The Swami himself opened the door to a most unexpected sight. There, standing before him was a stately lady fully covered in a white burkha, with only a rectangular opening over her face. That opening too was covered with white netting. The lady spoke to him in the most cultured, British-accented English: "Good Morning, Swamiji. Please forgive me for this intrusion. I am a childhood friend of the woman you know as Sapnabhairavi. I wonder if I might talk to you a while about her. My name is Urvashi Rahman."

"Of course. Absolutely. Most welcome," said the Swami ebulliently, for that is how he felt on hearing the name of his old friend. He ushered the visitor in. His mother came in and introductions were made. The lady of the house offered tea, and the guest graciously accepted.

The Swami and the visitor sat down facing each other. She began. "Swamiji, Shampa - that is, Sapnabhairavi - and I grew up together in Bengal. I was then sent to England and lost all contact with her. Somehow she found out my address and wrote a letter to me from Sylhet. In it she wrote a great deal about you, and also said that you are a prominent citizen of Silchar. Indeed I had no trouble finding you."

"I did not even know that Sapnabhairavi was ever in Bengal. Actually, I know nothing about her life prior to her meeting Vajraninad. Nor does Vajraninad for that matter. You do know about him?"

"Yes, indeed. Shampa wrote she had taken up with him as her spiritual companion."

"So are you proceeding to Sylhet to meet them?"

"Well, I was planning to. But I have learned through enquiries that they have recently moved to Aizawl, and set up an ashram somewhere on a remote hill. So I will go to Aizawl and try to track them down."

"I did not know they had moved. But if you need any help in Aizawl, my childhood friend is now the administrator of the Lushai Hills District. He is Deputy Commissioner Shamsul Huda Khan. Anyone will show you his office or residence. I can give you a letter of introduction and he will help you find your friends."

"Thank you very much, Swamiji. That is very kind of you. While on this subject, will you answer me one question - no matter how strange it sounds? If either of the two of them were in any trouble, who would care most and help most?"

"The question is answered very easily. It would be me. But in my absence, my friend the DC will gladly help if you mention my name to him. Why, do you foresee any trouble?"

Tea and sweets arrived, and after a stern look of warning at her tea-addict son, the mother relented to give him his fourth cup of the morning. She joined them for a bit and the conversation meandered. The Swami noticed that Urvashi Khan had great difficulty seeping tea through the opening of the burkha. She held the netting open with her left hand while taking sips so that no part of her face was ever visible. The Swami was amazed to observe this process. But suddenly now, a bit of tea got spilled over her burkha in the midriff area. The mother quickly led the visitor to the inner sanctum and helped her wash the stained area. It remained wet, but would dry quickly.

When they came back, the mother excused herself and the visitor picked up the original thread again. "You were asking me if I foresaw any trouble for my friends. No, not really. But there was a disturbing note in Shampa's letter. It was as though she was moving to Aizawl against her will. I just had a nameless feeling that things might come to a bad pass. Anyway, Swamiji, the main reason I came here as long as I was sojourning in Silchar is to hear from you about my childhood friend. It is clear that next to her man, you are by far the closest person to her. Please tell me anything and everything about them. I have as much time as you can spare."

Upon that long speech the Swami completely melted. He then embarked upon the most detailed account of anything he has given anyone down to the detail of how Sapnabhairavi liked to dress, how she carried a flower basket, how she used a champa as her signature, etc. He also included the full history of the Polashi Kharga. He felt encouraged to continue his detailed narrative with great gusto when he saw that his listener was completely engrossed in it. After the story ended she asked several questions. She ended by asking the Swami if he knew why Sapnabhairavi used a champa as her signature. Yes, the Swami knew the answer well.

"You see, Miss Rahman, it helped constantly remind her of someone she had dearly loved and lost. Whenever Sapnabhairavi was surrounded by the scent of champa, she felt that that someone was next to her. Whenever she gave someone a champa, she felt as though they were offering the flower together. This is how she clung on to the memory of that person every waking moment. But she never told us who that was."

"Thank you so much for indulging me so generously. I have just one more question: Do you have anything of hers, anything I could touch or feel or look at?"

"Do I indeed?" thought the swami. He wracked his brain but could not come up with anything. But then it suddenly occurred to him. He excused himself for a moment, went to his study and brought out his bound composition book. He opened it to where there was a folded piece of paper with some handwriting on it. "Miss Rahman, as you must know, Sapnabhairavi had a most endearing streak of mischief in her. One day she gave this to me. She said she wanted to write an 'Ashram Poem' in three paragraphs. She had written the 'Hermit' paragraph. I was to add the 'Jungle' paragraph. And a third person she had in mind would some day write the 'Peace' paragraph."

Urvashi Rahman took the piece of paper and read again and again. She ran the fingers of her right hand over the piece of paper. The Swami offered her pen and paper to copy it, but she said she had memorized it. She asked the Swami if he had done his paragraph yet. The Swami said nearly apologetically that he had had forgotten all about this poem.

At length the visitor took her leave, thanking the Swami profusely while holding his two hands warmly in her own two hands. The Swami found this gesture most heartwarming, but puzzled about its incongruity with the burkha conservatism. He offered his vehicle and driver to take the lady wherever she wanted a lift to, but she declined with thanks. She already had a vehicle. As the Swami came out to see her off he saw a shiny vehicle parked on the street, with a tall Nepalese driver standing next to it.

The Swami spent the rest of the day turning the visit over and over in his mind. He was surprised how comfortable he felt in presence of this lady - almost as comfortable as she felt chatting with Sapnabhairavi. And then he became most concerned about the dark issue of ‘trouble’. He now regretted that he did not probe that issue further. Anyway, he felt better when he realized that it would be quite easy for the lady to find the DC, who would then take care of things if things went wrong. He also felt now that he should reestablish contact with the pair of his old friends - perhaps even convince them to move down to Silchar. He would help them set up an ashram here. Perhaps a visit to his friend the DC in Aizawl would be the first step.

5

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER KHAN GETS AN IDEA

In the last days of World War II, and before the British rule in India ended, Shamsul Huda Khan was appointed administrator of the Lushai Hills, home to a number of tribal groups, historically of Mongoloid origin. These parts of India were still somewhat unruly and were administered by local chieftains under the tutelage of the British. A few years ago Khan had joined the Indian Civil Service upon passing the tough competitive examination. He then quickly rose to his present position of high responsibility – being the first regular government administrator of the Lushai Hills District. He had the title of Deputy Commissioner. This was an experimental assignment, and he had to walk a fine line between his responsibility as the administrator and paying homage to the symbolic rule of chieftaincy. This was a period of transition, in many ways. But there was a great deal more to his job. The Lushai Hills were a highly sensitive area, both politically and militarily, with many interested parties: The soon-to-depart British, the soon-to-take-charge Indians, the war-minded Japanese, the sidelined Burmese, the rising Americans, the feuding tribal groups jockeying for political power - all had their eyes watching the events here. Moreover, refugees fleeing the war had inundated this area. So the DC had been given some special briefings by some very hush-hush people in the capital. His office was to stay in close contact with military police who were very much in evidence all over the District.

So DC Khan had braced himself for serious and dangerous developments. He had a few things going for him. He became close friends with the local base commander of the military police, the Assam Rifles. The commander was a turbaned Sikh named Col. Sukhvinder Singh Aurora, on assignment from the Punjab Regiment. DC Khan also befriended the Superintendent of Police - the regular civilian police - who was really his subordinate. Andrew Zoramthanga was an Indian Police Service Cadre officer, and was as bright and energetic an officer as DC Khan had ever met. Both the local police and the Assam Rifles reported to the Inspector General of Police in Shillong, an Englishman whom DC Khan had come to know also. All in all, he did not lack support in the event he needed any.

The three men - the DC, the SP and the Colonel - all shared a common trait. They were conscientious and humane in their official dealings. They were professionals who worked harmoniously with the British officers, being neither hostile nor obsequious. They knew that it was a matter of a couple of years before the war would be over and the British would leave India. And so patience was the watchword for them.

As it turned out, DC Khan did face a huge crisis. But it had nothing to do with any of the above issues. It was a most sinister development that had virtually crippled his District and turned it into the high plains of fear. After he and his people unsuccessfully wrestled with the problem for months - during which the problem only grew worse – DC Khan decided that it was time for fresh thinking. This was the fall of 1946 and the mountain air was crisp and clear. Occasional rains helped wash down the lush jungles all around Aizawl. One evening the DC decided to pace the veranda of his opulent official bungalow, and think with a clear head.

Suddenly he heard a noise from the flower shrubs in the corner of the garden, as if some animal or a large bird was moving inside them. He walked over to examine. He saw a village woman with a flower basket in her left hand was plucking flowers. Instead of the customary tribal garb she was wearing a sari, Bengali style. She became frightened when she saw him and came out on to the full light of the security lanterns. She said: "I am so sorry, Sir. I did not mean to steal your flowers. But so many have bloomed. I thought you would not miss them if I took a few for my worship hour. Sorry, Sir! Are you the Saheb of the bungalow?"

The DC was not listening. He was completely taken by the beauty of this village woman. He noted in particular the eyes - most unusual in that they seemed to hold some deep mystery. The DC had never seen eyes like this before. When he realized that she was apologizing to him, he said quickly: "No matter. Please help yourself. I am concerned, however, that you are out this late - given the present, extremely dangerous situation. And yes, I am the DC."

"Thank you, DC Saheb. I am not fearful. I figure that if my time comes, I will go. But this whole business of the Hindu monster, it seems to me, is not for the police or the military. It is for a holy man. I would implore you to consult a Hindu holy man - perhaps from down in Silchar. Do you know any such person?"

"That is a most interesting idea. I will think about it. Thank you. Would you like me to have someone escort you home?"

"That is not necessary, Sir. I will go now. Thank you for the flowers. Please have this one - it seems to be particularly fragrant."

She offered him a single champa.

The DC came inside his home and told the story to his wife Koeli. She also thought it was an interesting idea. Then she said: "Siddhartha?"

"Yes, Sidhartha."

The DC knew that everyday that went by might produce another victim. So he immediately arranged a trip to Silchar.

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After a very early start from Aizawl on Sunday, September 8, 1946, the DC arrived in Silchar in the late afternoon in his official vehicle with his driver and handyman. When he knocked on the door, the mother - whom he knew since his childhood - opened the door. The DC bent forward and touched her feet. She placed her right hand on his head, with profuse words of welcome. Then she hugged him the same way she hugged her own son. Presently the Siddhartha came out. The two childhood friends were meeting after quite some time.

Now, there was a standing joke between the two friends. Siddhartha maintained that the Shamsul never came for the pure pleasure of visiting his friend, but that there was always some agenda. Usually it was to seek some advice on some personal family matter. So this time Siddhartha greeted his friend with: "Ah my dear Senator, have you come just for the joy of seeing me, or is that a scroll I see in your toga?"

"I have come just to see you, Caesar. And there is also a scroll in my toga," Shamsul did not miss a beat.

As the DC fully expected, he was invited to stay for evening rice and to spend the night, and more nights if he could stay. So he sent his vehicle away, telling the driver to return in the morning. There would be another passenger, he told the driver. He gave them some money and asked them to purchase several tins of Capstan cigarettes, and a few boxes of matches. The driver and the handyman went off to stay in the Government Circuit House near Tarapur. The DC then asked the Swami's mother: "Auntie, will you make some of those special onion pakoras with fresh coriander leaves and chopped green chilies?"

The auntie said the process was already under way.

Now tea and snacks were served, and the mother went inside and busied herself in preparing an elaborate special meal. The two friends were alone. The Swami spoke:

"Shamsul, did a young woman named Rahman contact you in the last few of days, by any chance?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Well, she came to see me. Last Sunday, in fact. She was trying to track down some common friends in Aizawl. So I told her to go talk to you and mention my name, and told her that you would help her find them. Anyway, it is a strange coincidence that I refer someone to you, and within days you arrive here. It is another strange coincidence that for reasons of my own, I was thinking of coming to visit you."

"It *is* a little strange. Anyway, let us get to the scroll. This is a very serious and gravely dangerous matter that has already cost many innocent lives. I will get right to the point."

6

MEGHASWAMI IS PUT IN THE PICTURE

The Lushai Hills in the east of India are a collection of parallel ranges of hills, predominantly in the North-South direction. The hills are densely forested and lush green. The deep gorges of the hills are often filled with mist, creating a great aura of a mysterious beauty - as in some Chinese or Japanese paintings. Aizawl stands 4000 feet above sea level in this setting - basically a small town carelessly draped over a hilltop. And it is itself surrounded by hills.

Aizawl and its surrounding areas are currently undergoing a tremendous construction boom, especially with regard to roads and bridges and viaducts. The rugged Silchar-Aizawl road had been completed, but now an entire network of jeepable roads is being built to connect the interior habitations to the main road. These bridle roads also provide the Assam Rifles the ability to patrol the interior areas. All types of buildings - such as post offices and hospitals and government offices - are being built. Telegraph link has been established, but there are no telephone lines yet connecting Aizawl to the rest of India. All in all, here is great employment opportunity and attendant prosperity among the locals. Everyone is trying to partake of this boom, and in the process, helping man gain a foothold in this wild frontier of nature. These men are, by and large, men of very special makeup: Rugged, with an inherent, unstated, love and respect for the wild side of nature.

Starting about December of last year, 1945 that is, some very strange rumors were making the rounds and growing louder. There were reportedly some sightings of what the locals called a Hindu monster. What is a Hindu monster? Well, they had heard about something in the Hindu lore called rakkhosh. This is the Bengali pronunciation, but the actual word is rakshasa. It is described in the lore as a hairy, grotesque man-beast that tears into human flesh with his hands, and devours it with great relish. Whatever it is, it has been sighted only after dark - never by daylight. Moreover, this particular rakkhosh also carries a huge sword which he wields with considerable facility. These rumors took a very dark turn when in January, a villager who went to gather firewood in the evening was found beheaded. Upon that, everyone but the most fearless stopped going out after dusk, and all construction work had to be confined to the hours of bright sunlight. As more victims turned up, even the daylight labor force started dwindling. We are virtually at a standstill as far as outdoors construction work is concerned. Worse yet, the newer victims are being found in nearby villages, and the killers domain has now touched the edge of the town itself. Each victim is beheaded with a clean, single sweep of the sword. Another development is that starting about July, the victims have gone from being all male to all very young females who are violated before the beheading. Thus far, eleven men and seven women have been killed.

On one of the hills surrounding Aizawl there is an abandoned building that lies in ruins now. The building was some type of a military construction in the shape of a long house - made mostly of bamboo posts, woven bamboo walls and corrugated metal sheets. Only two rooms now remain intact. About six months ago, starting about April, the odd fearless hunters, firewood gathers and orchid collectors who were out at night began to notice strange lights flickering there. It soon emerged that an itinerant sadhu – a holy man – from the plains had arrived and settled up there. About once a week the sadhu would come down to the village at the foot of the hill and buy some provisions - mostly

rice, dal, cooking oil etc. He did not speak much to anyone. The appearance of the Hindu monster followed by the appearance of the Hindu sadhu for the villagers was too much of a coincidence. They connected the two. The thinking among the villagers is that he is the beast-master. The beast sleeps, or is dead, during the daylight hours. The sadhu awakens him at night through some ritual procedure, and lets him loose.

Right now, the stoppage of the construction work is the least of the problems. The loss of innocent lives at a frequency that is increasing alarmingly has cast a pall on Aizawl and its surroundings. Nobody feels safe.

Needless to say, the police and the local soldiery have been doing everything they can to protect the villagers. However, the killer has proved to be more elusive than a man-eating tiger. If the police guard one sector at night, the killer appears at another sector, or does not appear at all. One time the police tried to place a cordon around the entire village, but because of their small number, they were spread too thin. That night they lost one of their own.

A party of soldiers climbed up the hill to the ruins, but the sadhu was not there when they arrived. They did not find anything suspicious at the sadhu's lodgings, but one of them thought there were signs of two people living there. The most notable thing there was a five-foot tall image of the goddess Kali.

The next day two policemen went to the ruins and waited until the sadhu arrived. But the sadhu shooed them away, refusing to talk to them. Since the policemen were given no authority to bring the sadhu in, they simply left.

The sadhu looked every bit a genuine Hindu holy man. In absence of any evidence against him, the DC decided not to bring him in for questioning. It might foment religious strife in this super-sensitive area.

The military arranged a reconnaissance over-flight. But nothing was observed except for some scattered old structures such as the sadhu's lodgings.

The villagers are now up in arms to the extent that they might harm the sadhu. However, the sadhu has now stopped coming to the village. God knows how he is surviving without provisions.

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The Swami listened to the entire account in silence, consuming two cigarettes during the period. He held his cigarette in a strange fashion. He put the butt between his index finger and the middle finger. Then he closed his palm to make an air chamber. He made tiny hole between his closed thumb and the closed index finger. He then sucked the smoke through this hole. His lips never touched the cigarette. He now puffed silently for a minute, blowing perfect rings of smoke into the air. Then he asked the obvious question:

"And this is a matter for me how?"

"I figure that you might be able to communicate with the sadhu, if anyone could. I figure he must be in a position to shed some light on the situation - whether or not he himself has anything to do with it. We need some handle on this problem. And frankly, I have run out of options."

"You mean the sadhu and I are birds of the same feather?"

"Something like that."

"Are there any other reasons why you thought of me?"

The DC did not respond.

"And I suppose you have already planned on taking me with you tomorrow."

"I am an optimist."

"If I am to go and try to talk to the sadhu, I must go prepared. So I must be thoroughly briefed, and also I want to be able to make some enquiries of my own."

The DC smiled: "Siddhartha, I remember the whole time we were in High School your ambition was to be a great detective. Here is your chance. You can be a real-life detective in a real-life murder mystery, with elements of great danger and intrigue. You would not find such a case in the most imaginative of fiction. So, go to it. As far as investigating, you have a blank check. I will even get you your own Watson."

"Good, but I will have to stop at a store to get a supply of cigarettes before heading off to the jungles."

"It has already been seen to."

All the time this conversation was taking place, another point was taking shape in the Swami's mind. It was this: The DC's arrival from Aizawl after a week of his referring Urvashi Rahman to him was not the only coincidence involving just those two. The DC had just spoken of a newly arrived sadhu in Aizawl, with perhaps a companion. Urvashi Rahman was looking for a newly arrived sadhu and his female companion in Aizawl. This is one coincidence too many. Just as the Swami started to say that, a family of relatives from Rangir Khari arrived noisily. Exuberant greetings were exchanged, the DC was introduced and everybody got drawn into the sociable commotion. In the tumultuous events that would unfold in the next days, the Swami would never remember to compare notes with the DC on Urvashi Rahman again.

And so it was that on the very first day the Swami was appointed a detective - and through no fault of his - a very crucial link in the investigation that could have been made did not get made.

7

JUNGLE THOUGHTS IN VAIRENGTE

The day-long Jeep ride back to Aizawl on Monday, punctuated by stops for tea and refreshment, could have been enjoyed as one of the greatest tourist roadtrips of the world, had it not been for the overwhelming sense of looming danger. The Swami was mostly quiet, occasionally asking disjointed questions. After entering the undulating Lushai Hills, the DC called a rest stop at Vairengte. As they were seeping tea and munching on samosas in a roadside teashop, the Swami asked:

"Will I be able to talk to some of the people who have sighted the killer?"

"As early as tomorrow morning."

"Did the reconnaissance aircraft take any photographs?"

"Yes, the military police have them."

"How can I go to the sadhu's place?"

"A Jeep will take you over a bridle road as close as possible. Then it is about an hour and a half's hike up along trails overgrown with vegetation. I will give you a scout and two armed policemen to go with you."

"No, no policemen. I need to gain the sadhu's trust."

"They can stay back some distance. If there's any danger, the scout can blow his whistle, and help will arrive in minutes."

"Why did one of the soldiers think there was somebody else living there besides the sadhu?"

"He thought he saw items of undergarment belonging to a woman. There was also a woven bamboo flower basket with a handle that women usually use to cull fresh flowers."

They finished tea and Swami felt like stretching his legs. So they went for a walk along the rustic highway past the row of shops, to where the road offered unrestricted view. From here, they could see the lush hills and dense jungles of Vairegnte. It seemed to the Swami as though he were standing on a roof of the world, and looking out on other roofs. He had the distinct sense of being closer to the sky, and drawn to the jungle. The unfinished poem came to mind. He still had to write the 'Jungle' paragraph. The Swami remarked to his friend: "This is the densest jungle I have ever seen - pristine, primitive jungle. This is what we would poetically call in Bengali aranya adim, the forest primeval. Suddenly, the sight of the jungle makes me feel so very alive."

"That is as it should be. The jungle is very old - it is the first sentient life nature created. When you relate to it, you tap into the first life."

"And yet, we are headed towards stark terror that inhabits these very jungles."

"Stark and primitive. There is wild beauty all around you - wide varieties of orchids grow and die without ever being seen by man. And within this unseen beauty here are fear and foreboding - dangers that lurk in the dark, not all known to us. These jungles here are considered to be some of the world's most pristine. The military thinks that someday Vairengte will be the premier center in the whole world for training in jungle warfare."

"Shamsul, why are we here? Why are these dark happenings not in the flat lands of Assam or Bengal? Why not Calcutta or Shillong? You know, I get this feeling that we are embarked upon a kind of organic adventure - not only doings of man, but also doings of the jungle in the sense that its presence affects the doings of man. And I am fearful that, unbeknownst to us, it may draw us into its own world and influence how we think and what we do."

"It is very odd that you should make that particular comment about organic adventure. It is true in more ways than you are thinking. What you fear may happen has already happened, literally. Just wait and see."

A short time before entering the town the DC asked his driver to pull over. The two friends stepped out and walked to the edge of the road, at a sheer precipice. The DC pointed to a magnificent hill in the distance, its peak capped by cumulus clouds of the season. It also seemed to be raining over the hill. The DC said: "Within this spectacular vista, somewhere, there is that blood-curdling terror - the most ghoulish horror. That is where you will be going. Think about it. There is still time to back out."

As he said that, both men felt a cold shiver go up their spines. The Swami took in the scene and spoke to his friend. "Remember that wonderful Bengali adventure book we both so liked, called The Mountains of the Moon? A young Bengali fellow found himself in Africa, and thrust in the middle of great adventures. I now feel like such an adventurer myself."

The DC responded: "As I recall, that story also involved a monster that lived in the jungle."

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The Swami was greeted most warmly by Koeli Khan upon their arrival at the DC's residence, which commanded a magnificent view of the hills. The Swami knew Mrs. Khan well, having attended the Khan wedding, and then having seen her many times since. He was very glad to see her again, and held her two hands warmly in both his hands.

Mrs. Khan's care soon revived the travel-weary men. After a warm-water bath and a change of clothes, they now sat in the living room with steaming cups of milked and sugared tea. Then the Swami spoke. "Shamsul, even though I have just heard of this affair, I have a sense of personal tragedy. I don’t mean something like an extrasensory perception. I mean that something I have heard that has made me think that I have some involvement in this affair. But I cannot put my finger on it. Shamsul, why me?"

"Well, who better to reach a sadhu than a sadhu?"

"I suppose so. But I don’t know … Is there something you are not telling me?"

Before the DC could reply, the maid came and called them to dinner. The DC said: "Let's put this out of our minds and enjoy the fine meal. I don't mean this is an occasion for merrymaking, but we need to distract ourselves now so we have our wits about in the morning when the work will start in right earnest. We have a big day tomorrow. Excuse me for a minute while I make some phone calls to get everything ready for tomorrow."

8

POLICE SUPERINTENDENT ZORAMTHANGA

The two men arrived very early Tuesday morning at the DC's office, but even at this hour, someone was waiting for them. The Swami saw a very tall, handsome and athletic-looking young man in khaki police uniform, with that regulation diagonal belt across his chest. The adornments on his collar and epaulets left no doubt that he was a high-ranking police officer. The man rose and saluted the DC. The DC then introduced them: "Siddhartha, meet Andrew Zoramthanga, IPS, the Superintendent of Police. He is the sharpest police officer we have here - and probably the sharpest in the Indian Police Service Cadre today. He will work with you, fully devoting his time to this matter. He has intimate knowledge of the matter and will be able to help you much better than I personally can."

The SP saluted the Swami and then they shook hands. The Swami took an instant liking to him. The SP spoke first. "Maharaj, we can get acquainted as we get started with the work at hand. I have got five eyewitnesses waiting to speak to you in the conference room in the next building."

"Fine. But you are a man of the Christian faith. You need not call me Maharaj."

"I rather like the sound of it! And please call me Andrew."

"Fine, Andrew. I wish to speak not only to the eyewitnesses who saw the alleged killer or the killings, but also the ones who have seen the sadhu," said the Swami.

"Of course. It has all been arranged."

The Swami and the SP sat at a table facing the five villagers, seated on a bench facing them. The Swami immediately began asking a series of questions.

"Those who saw the so-called monster but did not actually see him kill please raise your hands."

Three men raised their hands. The Swami then asked the other two men to wait outside. He resumed with the remaining three men. "If there is an agreed-upon description of the monster, one of you please describe him."

There was a brief conference. Then one man spoke. "We have seen him only after dark. We only caught a fleeting glimpse of him. He is very tall, about seven feet. He is n*ak*ed except for a sash around his waist for fastening the scabbard. His sword hangs from the sash to his left, and some type of a small box hangs from the sash to his right. The front of his body is covered all over with button-like things, like the barnacles you see in photos of sea creatures. These buttons glow with a dull greenish glow. From his back rotten flesh is hanging and peeling off.

"His face is covered with long beard but it not made of hair. It is vegetation - like fungus and fern. The fern fronds have grown in an intertwining manner - as though someone has meticulously braided them. One of us thinks he even saw a small rare orchid of the kind found on the hill blooming on his face. This face, I tell you, is an organic thing - half plant and half animal.

"The person who saw him from the closest distance thought that green moss is growing from his flesh elsewhere on his body. In yet other places, the flesh is covered with crawling maggots. The maggots stick their heads straight out of the flesh, and sway in the air. This moss also glows faintly in dark. His hair is like thick strands of rope, and covers most of his face that is not covered by the organic beard. He has no lower or upper lip, and the bloodied teeth are all you see where his mouth should be. And everyone has smelled that horrible, horrible smell - the stench of hell. Nothing less."

"So that is what Shamsul meant when he said the organic adventure was more real than I imagined," thought the Swami to himself. He asked: "This sword, about how long is it?"

"Its blade is probably about four feet, and the hilt another foot. When he saw us - in each case - he drew this sword."

"Can each of you demonstrate for us exactly how he held his sword? I will get you a bamboo pole five feet long."

It took about fifteen minute for a constable to fetch such a pole. It so happened that one end of the pole was thicker, and the Swami suggested that this be considered the hilt. It was handed to one of the men who said: "I had a machete in my hand. When I saw him from a distance, I instinctively raised the machete. Then he drew his sword and held it like this."

The man held the hilt of the pole with his two hands, extended the pole forward, and lowered the point of the pole slightly towards the ground - as if towards the navel of his opponent facing him.

"Gedan no Kamae," murmured the Swami under his breath.

"Excuse me?" said the SP.

"I was just talking to myself, Superintendent. I will explain later." He then turned to the next villager and asked him to demonstrate. The man said: "I was hunting in the jungle with my shot gun. When I saw him, I fired a shot in the air. Then he drew his sword and held it like this."

He gave the same demonstration as the man before him but pointed the tip of the sword upward - as if towards the head of his imaginary opponent.

"Seigan no Kamae," again the swami spoke to himself.

The third man's stance was same as the first man's. All three men said that after the encounter, they ran away. The rakkhosh, they said, did not chase them. Now the Swami asked all three: "Think carefully. Did he have a second, smaller sword?"

They all said no. He thanked the three men and said they could go. But they lingered, hesitantly. Then one man spoke. "I would like to add something. I speak Bengali and have grown up with many Bengali friends. I have heard many rakkhosh stories from many of their grandmothers. I have a good idea what the rakkhosh is. I swear to you that what I saw is no human and no beast and no man-beast. It is a rakkhosh - really and truly."

The three men left and the two men waiting outside came in. The Swami asked each to describe what he saw.

The first man said he saw the killing in dark, near new moon, and he mostly saw in silhouette what happened. He saw the victim lying supine and the rakkhosh standing over him. The latter then cut off the victims head with the sword. The Swami asked:

"Could you tell how long the sword was?"

"No. It was too far."

"Was the killer bending down when he cut off the head?"

"Yes."

The second man saw even less. He heard blood-curdling screams from the victim, looked at that direction and saw one man crouching over another one lying on the ground.

"Did any of you smell any unusual smells?" asked the Swami.

They had not. But, they said, they were too far for that.

"Could you see if the man was n*ak*ed?"

"His profile looked to be that of a n*ak*ed man."

"Could you see if he had a beard?"

They were not sure.

The Swami thanked them and closed the interview. He said to the SP: "I think we are finished here. We need not keep these men any longer."

A police vehicle drove them to a village at the foot of the hill, to a general store there. The owner and his assistant stood up when they saw the unlikely pair: A policeman and a monk. The SP told the owner: "We are here on police business. I want you to tell the Maharaj anything and everything you can tell about the sadhu on the hilltop that used to shop here."

The owner said that the sadhu was a small man with a long beard and long hair. He spoke Hindi, but the shopkeeper’s assistant, who was a Sylheti, got talking to the sadhu and found out that the latter

was a Sylheti as well. Did the sadhu seem to know about the monster killings? No, there was no discussion about that. What did the sadhu purchase? Usually the basic staples. Rice, chana dal, potatoes, mustard oil, salt, sugar, tea and suchlike. Did he buy anything unusual? Well, one time he asked for a bottle of scented hair oil, which the shop did not have. They said they would have one and reserve it for the sadhu when he came next time. But he never came after that time. Did the shopkeeper remember anything else about the sadhu, anything that stood out?

"Well, it was his voice, you see. Very deep and very rich - it was fascinating to see such a rich and heavy voice come out from such a small man."

The Swami suddenly felt sapped of all energy. He sat down, or nearly collapsed, on the veranda of the shop. The SP came rushing to his aid. The Swami said:

"Andrew, can we go somewhere and get a cup of strong sweet tea?"

9

COLONEL AURORA'S HAND SIGNS

They sat at a streetside cafe and drank strong tea made by boiling tea leaves in pure milk. It revived the Swami. He now offered a Capstan to the SP before lighting his own. But the SP declined, saying: "Maharaj, please do not take any offense. But there is a higher authority who has forbidden me to smoke. It is my wife Ione."

The Swami lit his own cigarette and said: "I am glad to hear what you just said."

The two now got back to talking shop. The Swami said that, if possible, he immediately wanted to do two things. First, he wanted to talk to someone with knowledge of the recent military history of this area. Second, he wanted to talk to a medical scientist with some knowledge about human nutrition and dietetics. The SP considered his request for a minute and then replied. "As to the military, it is best worked through the DC's office. I will call them, and see if I can set up something as soon as possible. The head of base here is one Col. Aurora who is a personal friend of the DC. So we maybe in luck. And afterwards we will go to the Civil Hospital here which is our best bet. There are no scientists in Aizawl, but we may be able to talk to a couple of doctors."

The SP made the calls and came back to report that a meeting had been set up with Col. Aurora for 1 PM. The SP looked at his watch. "It is now nearly 11 O'clock. Let us have some lunch, and then we will head for the military base."

The SP asked the Swami if he ever had steamed dumplings called Momos. The Swami had not even heard of them. The SP then called over the owner of the cafe and asked if he would make special Momos for the Swami, without pork. The owner felt honored by this request. Some fried rice and sauted vegetables were also ordered. The anticipation of the delicious fare caused the Swami to perk up. He felt much better.

Over the lunch the two men made light conversation for the first time. The SP asked the Swami: "The DC told me that you are an avid reader of mysteries. Who is your favorite detective?"

"Thorndyke."

"Oh yes. I have read some of the Thorndyle-Jarvis stories. First they tell you in intricate detail how a crime is committed. Then they turn around and tell you from the opposite angle how the same crime is solved."

"Exactly. I have often thought that a variation of this would be to tell a mystery story in several small stories that intertwine and intersect and crisscross. And how about *your* favorite detective? Do you have one?"

"Well, I tend to like mysteries that are laced with outdoor adventures, rather than straight murder mysteries. So I would say that at this time my favorite is Nayland Smith."

"Ah, Sir Denis Nayland Smith! A very fine character. I have in fact read all the Fu Manchu stories, and am disappointed that there is no more to read."

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Colonel Aurora was a very fit-looking man with an appropriate military bearing, and a finely manicured moustache. He was in plain clothes, complemented by a white turban. He was waiting for them in a conference room with two British officers. As the SP introduced the Swami to the Colonel, the former said: "Bole so nihal."

"Sat Sri Akal," replied the Sikh, with a warm, broad smile.

As the Swami now scanned his eyes over the two Englishmen, he was most surprised to recognize one of them. "Major Simpson, fancy meeting you here!"

"It is good to see you too, Swami. But it should not come as a surprise that I am here. After all I work here."

The Colonel was, however, surprised: "You two know each other?!"

"It's a long story," said the Major. "Anyway, Swami, I understand you are doing some investigating with regard to the Hindu monster killings?"

"Actually, I am here to try to meet with a sadhu that lives up on the hills. The DC wants to know if he could shed any light on the killings. The DC thought that the sadhu may be best approachable by me."

The Major smiled: "It takes one to known one - that type of thing, eh? Very funny, a Swami playing a detective, eh Carruthers?"

But the second British officer - a Capt. Carruthers - did not smile at the Major's joke. He kept looking sternly to an empty space in front of him. A little deflated, the Major turned to the Swami:

"And when do you plan to approach this sadhu?"

"We will start up the hill at first light tomorrow."

"Why not go the day after tomorrow? Then I could also come with you. Tomorrow I am committed to show Lady Wyndmere the town."

At this the SP said in his firm professional voice: "We are going tomorrow. As military police, you are of course entitled to join us, tomorrow."

The Major thought for a moment, and then turned to Col. Aurora: "Carry on, Colonel."

The Colonel was sitting at the head of the long conference table. The two officers sat to his left. Major Simpson chose a chair to sit as far as he could from everyone. The Swami and the SP sat to the Colonel's right, the Swami next to him. On the desk in front of the Colonel was a tall stack of files, nearly a foot high. Now the Swami asked: "Colonel, the military watches this place very closely. Especially, you watch the influx of refugees. This is a very small town. If one day a very tall stranger arrived in town carrying a long sword, you would have known about him?"

"We most likely would."

"And did you?"

"Cannot say."

"Cannot say or will not say?"

"Take your pick."

"Colonel, I am asking you a very simple question. Did a tall stranger carrying a long sword arrive in Aizawl during the past year, say? Yes or no?"

"Cannot say."

Suddenly, the Swami spotted some movement of the Colonel's right hand. To his amazement, he saw that the Colonel had placed his right hand on the surface of the table next to the heap of files, where the other officers could not see it but the Swami and the SP could. When the Swami asked 'Yes or no?' the Colonel held out his index finger.

"If such a man were spotted, would he be let go or brought in for questioning?"

"Cannot say." (Two fingers.)

"If any such questionings took place, would there or would there not be records of such interview?"

"Cannot say." (One finger.)

"Colonel, if you would be so hush-hush about this, then there's no point in my asking questions. Is there any way you can help us or not?"

"Afraid not." (One finger) "Now, please excuse us as we have to go to another meeting. Please do not go, for I have ordered some refreshments. I will be back in half an hour, if you have further questions." The Colonel pretended to arrange the stack of files but actually pulled one file slightly out of the stack, stood up, and left with his colleagues.

The Swami sprang up and said: "Andrew, we have to be quick. You watch the door while I read. I will fill you in later."

The Swami pulled the file out of the stack and saw that it was stamped Top Secret with a red rubber stamp. He opened it by untying a string and found several handwritten pages fastened together in the top left corner. The Swami started reading quickly but thoroughly. He was done before the Colonel returned, alone.

The Swami said: "Thank you, Colonel, for seeing us. One thing surprised me. Major Simpson is your subordinate. Yet he was acting as though he were your boss. What is that about?"

"This I can answer. The Major is engaged to be married to a member of the British royal family. Also, his father was Governor of Bengal. The Major is here in India paying his dues, being groomed so that he could be positioned in the society as a hero of the Empire. Soon he will be Lord Something-or-other. But he already acts like one. He has no regard for the military chain-of-command. And we have no choice but to tolerate him."

"Now, Colonel, from the little I know about the Assam Rifles, they are doing a very crucial job here in Aizawl. Even so, this is a forgotten corner of the world, far removed from the great events that are unfolding in India and the world over. Why is it then that as many as two British officers are posted here?"

The Colonel was amazed. "Maharaj, I would not have expected that most astute observation from you. Actually, that is a puzzle for me as well. But I do not know the answer."

"Now, a hypothetical question: Any whiff of scandal involving the Major would be disastrous for him?"

"Without a doubt. The Major needs to remain squeaky clean, at least until the wedding."

"Also, Colonel, from his body language, it seemed that Capt. Carruthers did not much care to please his superior Maj. Simpson."

"Ah, that is the rare exception. Captain Carruthers is the only man in the Army that Maj. Simpson tiptoes around."

"Why is that?"

"Captain Carruthers is a British officer who knows things about Maj. Simpson - things that will not do to come out. You can guess what some of them are if you have been up on your readings lately."

"I see. And what was this bit about a Lady Wyndmere?"

"I understand that she is the Major's would-be sister-in-law who arrived from England a few days ago. She is staying at the Government Guest House."

"Thank you. But before we go, I beg you, please answer me one more question. It is of vital importance. If in March or April of this year Maj. Simpson convinced two people to live alone up on that hill, he would have known that they would surely be killed there by the monster?"

The Colonel did not respond. The Swami re-posed his question in the proper format: "Yes or No?"

The Colonel touched the sharp tip of his well-waxed moustache with one finger.

10

AT THE CIVIL HOSPITAL

As they were making their way to their vehicle, the SP turned to the Swami and said: "Maharaj, I am an officer of the Law. What happened in that conference room with that Top Secret file never happened."

"Andrew, I have no idea whereof you speak."

As they rounded a corner of the building, they saw Maj. Simpson with his back to them, reading a bulletin board. The Swami called out: "Goodbye for now, Maj. Simpson."

The man turned. It was not Maj. Simpson. He smiled brightly and said: "I am Havildar Haldar. Many people make that mistake when they see my back. Especially if I am wearing my cap, you cannot see that my hair is black. The Major's is blond."

The Swami smiled back and apologized. He told the SP: "He looks like an Anglo-Indian. Most Anglo-Indians usually have English names. It is interesting that he has a Bengali last name.

"Probably this is a rare case where the father is a Bengali," said the SP.

They arrived at the Civil Hospital in mid-afternoon. The SP had called ahead. They were shown into a doctors' consultation room. Presently, three men in white overalls appeared. One of them spoke: "I am Dr. Sangthuama. These are Drs. Saikia and Sengupta. We will try our best to answer your questions."

The SP introduced himself and the Swami, and then said: "This is a confidential police matter. Please treat this as such."

They all sat down. Then the Swami said: "Thank you for meeting with us, doctors all. My questions may sound very odd, but please pay no mind to why I am asking these. Simply give me your scientific answers as best as you can. My first question is this: If a man lives in complete isolation in a jungle, surviving by foraging, what will become of him - health-wise speaking?"

The doctors considered the question for a few moments. Then Dr. Saikia spoke. "There is not a simple answer. It depends on his diet - what type of animal flesh, is it cooked in fire or uncooked, is it fresh or putrid, what type of fruits and vegetation, what type of water, etc. But perhaps you want to know either a best-case or worst-case scenario?"

"The worst case."

"In the worst case, the man will develop, in a very short time of weeks or months, hideous diseases - diseases that we do not even know exist. His skin may erupt all over with lesions, his mouth may develop sores, his body may start to deform, and so on."

"But can he still remain physically strong?"

"It is possible."

"Now my second question: Before he entered the jungle, if this same man had been exposed to very high dosage of radiation in Hiroshima or Nagasaki but did not immediately die from it, could he develop warts over his body that glow at night?"

The listeners looked stunned. But the doctors recovered. They sat silently for quite a while. Dr. Saikia broke the silence. "We cannot answer this question - but not because we are not experts. In fact, no one can answer your question. This is a completely new subject, and information will be developed on this from here on out. So, it is correct to say that medical science today cannot answer your question. But perhaps Dr. Sengupta has a few comments."

The Swami looked at Dr. Sengupta, who looked lost in thought. He began. "First of all, it would be quite natural for the man to break out in tumors all over, or warts as you say. Second, we know of examples of living things glowing at night. In Central and South America, there are examples of fungus and frog species that glow at night - from very mild radioactivity. So I would say what you suggest is quite possible."

"And is it possible that this exposure to radiation that did not kill him immediately could make him temporarily stronger, more youthful - so to speak? What I am really asking is - could an old man become virile?"

"Possibly - through a change in his metabolism and blood circulation," replied Dr. Sengupta.

"Is it possible for this man to develop some condition which prevents him from moving about in daylight?"

Dr. Saikia took this question. "This could come about in one of two ways. He may have developed a daylight-impaired vision, or he may a skin condition that causes his him to experience pain by daylight."

"As to his mental state, could he become deranged and crazed to the extent of losing all human values?"

"More likely than not," Dr. Saikia replied again. His two colleagues nodded.

The Swami now turned full face to Dr. Sengupta: “You are a Bengali, and ever since you were a child you have heard stories of the mythical ghoul called rakkhosh. You have a mental picture of what it is like. Is it possible that this man could have, for all practical purposes and by all appearances, transformed to a rakkhosh - really and truly?”

"In a word, yes."

"Now my last question. Is it possible for plant life to grow from the body of this man?"

The three doctors looked at one another, as though wondering who should best answer the question. It seemed that a silent consensus was reached that Dr. Saikia should answer. He said: "We can only speculate. Suppose the man has permanently open wounds that are constantly exposed to plant spores in the air. This could happen in a jungle environment. Of these spores, there may be some that can attach themselves mechanically to the flesh. Now a plant or a moss or a fungus may grow by taking nutrients either from the air only, or from the flesh and the air. You know how lush green moss can grow on a concrete roof many stories above the ground. A thin layer of soil forms by deposition of dust from the air, and moisture and rainwater make this soil fertile. That reminds me ...," Dr. Saikia paused thoughtfully.

"Go on," said the Swami.

"Well, a while ago you asked what might prevent such a person from showing himself during daylight hours. If the plants are rooted in the flesh, then during sunlight hours the roots may be more active due to photosynthesis. And that might cause pain."

The two took leave of the good doctors who were too discombobulated to say very much except goodbye. As they approached their vehicle the Swami said: "We need to attend to two other things before we end this day. First, we need to discuss the plans for tomorrow's trip up the hill. And second, I need to fill you in on what this day has presented us with. Andrew, a cup of tea would be most suitable right about now."

"Maharaj, we are quite close to my office. Let us go there where we can attend to both the items on the agenda. As you can guess, I am on tenterhooks to know what the Dickens is going on."

11

HIGH TEA AT THE POLICE STATION

As soon as the two men were seated in the soft, padded chairs of the SP's office, the latter rang for his orderly. When he arrived the SP asked for tea and added: "I think our guest may be slightly hungry, considering I am." The orderly saluted silently and left.

The SP looked at the stacks of files and messages on his desk, and with one sweep of his hand, pushed them aside. Then he said: "I am all yours."

The Swami assumed a formal speaker's aspect. "There is a great deal about this business that remains unclear, so let me dwell on that little bit which does seem to be clear. We got a consistent description today of how the monster holds his sword and how the killer kills. Now, when I was studying Japanese Buddhism, I also did some reading about the Samurai way - out of sheer fascination. So I immediately recognized that the sword-holding stances the villagers demonstrated are the two most typical Samurai stances called Seigan no Kamae or the attack stance, and Gedan no Kamae which is an invitation to attack.

"The eyewitness description of the monster left no doubt that he had hideous diseases, and the horrible stench suggested that his flesh was rotting right on his live body. This condition must have come from his living alone in the jungle, cut off from the society. So my attention was directed to his diet.

"Now the business of glowing buttons and moss. I had also heard about the glowing frogs of Costa Rica, and even a type of glowing fungus. So my thoughts turned towards radioactivity. And immediately I realized that the monster appeared in this area shortly after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Further, I read that those who did not die from the bombings developed virulent skin eruptions."

The orderly returned with a large pot of tea and two plates-full of cucumber sandwiches and sliced plum cake. The SP started pouring tea for the Swami. The latter reached for a sandwich and resumed.

"So I had the beginnings of a theory. How do I test this theory? If a strange man, a tall foreigner carrying a long sword, arrived in these parts one day, who would be the most likely to notice? Surely the military! They were closely watching all activities in this region, and surely all comings and goings - especially with regard to the groups of refugees. And if the man turned out to be from Japan, who was most likely to have questioned him closely? Surely the military! And that is why we went to Col. Aurora."

More sandwiches and the plum cake slices were helped to. The Swami went on. "Now comes the most painful part for me. First, I heard that a soldier who went up to the sadhu's cottage in the hills thought there might have been a woman living with him. He also mentioned a five feet tall image of the goddess Kali. These rang a bell for me, quite loudly. Then today we heard that the sadhu was a small man with a voice like thunder. At that moment, everything fell into place for me. If there was

any doubt, it was dispelled by the sadhu's buying chana dal in place of the customary masoor or moong dal that people consume on a daily basis. The person I was thinking of was especially fond of chana dal.

"You see Andrew, I knew such a sadhu in Sylhet. His name is Vajraninad which means the voice of thunder. He lives with a spiritual female companion named Sapnabhairavi which means the dream consort. They are very dear friends of mine, although I have not seen them in some time."

As the SP refreshed their tea cups, the Swami now gave him a detailed account of Vajraninad and Sapnabhairavi - their chance meeting, their life together, the constant presence of one Maj. Simpson, and his own meeting these people. He then gave the SP an account of the Kali Temple raid and the provenance of the Plassey Kharga. He continued. "So I was quite sure that the people up on the hill were my old friends. This meant that I was no longer a dispassionate third party come here to help. I am myself involved in this business. I might add that this made me wonder about the strange coincidence that the DC thought of bringing me, of all possible people, here."

The Swami stopped to catch his breath, and the SP did not interrupt the flow of his narrative. The Swami lit a cigarette and resumed: "When we went to the military base, I was most surprised to see Maj. Simpson there, the person who was a routine fixture at my friends' place in Sylhet. His presence here has to be somehow connected to the presence of Vajraninad and Sapnabhairavi here - or perhaps the other way round. Otherwise this is yet another fantastic coincidence. When you have repeated coincidences, it is time to be suspicious. The Major heard from me about the sadhu on the hill, but did not say anything about this being our old, mutual friend Vajraninad. Either he truly did not know - which seems unlikely - or he was hiding something.

"I told you that this day was painful for me. How? Because the shopkeeper had told us that Vajraninad ordered a bottle of scented hair oil, but never again returned to pick it up. That suggested to me that one or the other or the both of them had come to some harm.

"And that is where we stand at this time. You have heard yourself what the Colonel had to say and what the doctors had to say. Now, it will take me about an hour to bring you up to date on that certain file which we did not open. So let me call Koeli and tell her I will be a little late coming home."

The SP pushed his telephone towards the Swami. When the call was finished, the SP said: "So, apart from matters of filling in some blanks, the main mystery is solved?"

"Far from it, Andrew, far from it. We have not even begun to scratch the surface."

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When the session was finished, the SP's driver took the Swami back to the DC's residence. On the way, they passed through the crowded shopping district. Suddenly the Swami saw, in front of a handloom shop, the white burkha-clad Urvashi Rahman. He asked the driver to stop and went over to her. After clearing his throat he said: "Miss Rahman!"

The woman turned, looked at him from behind the netting that covered her face, and shook her head from side to side. The Swami had made a silly mistake - he assumed if a woman was wearing a white burkha then she had to be Urvashi Rahman. He apologized. As he was turning to come back, he saw in the midriff area of the white burkha a faint stain - like a stubborn tea stain that remained after washing.

12

A STRANGER ARRIVES IN AIZAWL

On an evening of early November in 1945 a stranger arrived in Aizawl, having hitched a ride in a truck from the Burma border near Champhai, along with a group of refugees. He was a very tall man, nearly seven feet, wearing loose white clothes. He had a long sword in its scabbard, fastened to a sash around his waist. He was conspicuous, and the police watching the incoming refugees immediately noticed him. He was a foreigner without any papers of any kind. Nor did he speak any English. Nor was he a Burmese. With great effort and use of signs, the police succeeded in eliciting one bit of information: He was from Nihon. The police checked with the local newspaper bureau and found out that Nihon was Japan. The matter was now brought to the attention of the then Police Superintendent Bordoloi. To him, Japan at that date meant a great deal more than it meant to the police constables and inspectors who processed the man. Since there was no local immigration service to speak of, the SP spoke to the military base and confidentially expressed his fears. The military said they would pick up the man immediately. The SP then told his people to keep the man in an isolated cottage, and not to go near him except as needed.

The military separated the stranger from his sword and other possessions, and took him to the base and put him in a small shed in a remote corner of the base. They left him plenty of food and drinks. The man was not happy, but remained quiet. The military then got busy trying to find an interpreter of Japanese language.

But even as they were doing this, the military were consulting various experts on how to handle this guest. The experts asked if the man appeared to be in ill health, if he had any skin conditions, if he acted as though he were in some pain, etc. The answers to all these questions were negative. The experts then said that everyone should maintain great distance from this man. Essentially, the man should be considered quarantined. They said the military should determine as soon as possible where in Japan this man was from, and what his plans in Aizawl were.

As to finding a Japanese-English interpreter, the most likely place to try was the Buddhist monastery at Champhai. Within two days, the military located and brought to the base a monk from there. They set up a table and two chairs in front of the shed, quite far from it. When the interned Japanese man saw the monk, he looked startled. Probably he did not expect to see a Buddhist monk in this setting. But the monk quickly spoke to him in Japanese, and he became calm. The monk asked him to sit on the stairs to the shed. The monk and an officer, Capt. Carruthers, sat at the table. The interview began. Everyone had to speak loudly because of the intervening distance.

As the first order of business, it was determined that man was from Nagasaki, and was in fact there on August 9, 1945. In answer to the second question, the man said he wanted to go up to a hill outside Aizawl, and live there by himself. Why? This was a personal matter for him, he said. He needed to go through his whole story before he could explain this. This information was immediately relayed to the experts. As advice from the experts was being awaited, the interview proceeded.

The monk asked the questions, prompted by Capt. Carruthers. However, soon the man embarked upon a long narrative, and it was unnecessary to ask further questions. The monk continued to translate with great ease and fluency, and the Captain continued to rapidly write down the monk's words verbatim. At times it seemed to the Captain that more was being translated in English than was being said in Japanese. But he ascribed it to the need for elaboration of concise Japanese verbiage.

After the man stopped, the Captain asked one final question: "You say you do not know this Englishman's name. Would you recognize him if you saw him again?"

"That image is seared in my mind. I would recognize him even on a dark night. I want the message to go out that I am waiting for him. I want him to come out like a man and face me, on that hill where we last met. He can bring the same revolver with which he shot my boys. A Samurai can do kesa giri almost through the force of inertia, even after he has been shot."

Captain Carruthers then signed the report as the interviewing officer. He then wanted the monk's full name and address on the report in English, as the interpreter on record of the interview. The monk wrote: "Bhikkhuni Sumi, Buddhist Monastery, Champhai."

By the time the interview ended, a telegram arrived from the experts and was handed to Capt. Carruthers. He read:

FROM MEDICAL BRANCH GHQ INDIA
TO CAPTJECARRUTHERS ASSAM RIFLES AIZAWL

REGARDING DETAINED JAPANESE NATIONAL STOP UNDER PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES AND CONSIDERING ALL OPTIONS THE BEST COURSE IS LET MAN PROCEED TO REMOTE HILLS STOP AVOID ALL PROXIMITY AND DO NOT RETAIN ANY OF HIS POSSESSIONS INCLUDING SWORD STOP BURN SHED WHERE HE LIVED AND POUR TWO-FEET THICK CONCRETE SLAB OVER THE AREA STOP FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS TO FOLLOW STOP SENDING MEDICS TO TEST ALL WHO CAME IN PROXIMITY BOTH MILITARY AND CIVILIAN POLICE STOP CLASSIFY INTERVIEW RECORDS TOP SECRET STOP FOR TIME BEING DECLARE SAID HILLS OFF LIMITS TO CIVILIANS STOP SAY THIS IS NOW MILITARY TARGET PRACTICE RANGE END

Upon reading, Capt. Carruthers told the monk to tell the man he could go. The man was given back his things, and shown the road that lead to a streambed at the foot of the hill he wanted to go to. From his distance, he made a deep bow to the monk. The monk raised the right hand in blessing or goodbye. Directly the man left, the shed was set on fire.

Captain Carruthers instructed the monk never to speak about this to anyone, and then sent the same home with a large donation for the monastery. As he was now closing his file and tying it with the attached string, he realized that he may have made a huge mistake in letting the Japanese man go. The medical people issued their recommendation based on limited information. They had no

knowledge that this man had come to assassinate a British officer. But Capt. Carruthers did. It was his place to reconsider that recommendation. He did not.

The Captain came to his base commander's office, knocked on the door, and asked if they could have a word in private. Colonel Aurora asked him to come in and close the door behind him. The Captain gave him a full briefing, and then expressed his own agony. To this the Colonel replied: "The man will most likely die a horrible death up on those hills anyway. And as long as he remains up there, there is no chance of him coming close to Maj. Simpson. So I do not see a problem."

"Thank you, Sir, for putting my mind at ease. But now we have the problem of possible gross atrocities committed when, reportedly, Maj. Simpson so bravely vanquished the fierce Japanese commandoes. He was decorated for his valor."

"We do seem to have that problem. And I have no choice but to propose an investigation. But who under the present World circumstances would want to open an investigation on the deaths of a few Japanese spies in Indian territory in the hands of the Indian military - regardless of how the deaths occurred?"

"None, Sir."

"Well, I could suggest that the Kali Temple assault be also reopened together with the Japanese matter. May be something similar happened there. It sounded very odd to me that a few frail priests and attendants of a temple in a jungle in the desolate Ganges delta could wage a fierce rebellion against the British, requiring military action. We need to interview the soldiers who participated in this raid."

"I think you are unlikely to get any support there, considering that Maj. Simpson is practically untouchable."

"Nevertheless, I must do my job, and do it by the book. Perhaps we should at first talk to Havildar Haldar who has always accompanied the Major in all his activities."

After receiving strong assurances that his career would not be in jeopardy, the Havildar told the Colonel and the Captain a story about the raid on the Japanese spies that tallied completely with the account of the radioactive Samurai - rib-cracking and all. The Havildar was then asked about the Kali Temple raid. He again became very reticent, and had to be given another round of assurances. He then told the same story he told the people in Bengal - there in strictest confidence.

After the interview with the Havildar, the two men sat absorbing what he said. Then the Captain said out of the clear blue: "Sir, I think we should have a look at the Havildar's file - just to see if there is anything interesting in his background."

"Is there anything particular that is troubling you?"

"Well, Sir, I cannot imagine Maj. Simpson using words like bloody and damn and hell so copiously under any circumstances. He is a highborn, upper class British aristocrat - Harrow and Cambridge and the Royal Military School. It is most unlikely that he would step out of character. I want to be absolutely certain that Maj. Simpson is not the victim of some grand plot."

The file was brought in. The Havildar was born in Calcutta in 1918. The space for his father's name was filled with Unknown. His mother's name was entered as Shiuli Haldar. The Havildar's security clearance papers contained further information. Shiuli Haldar once worked as the Ayah in the Governor's House in Calcutta - in the employ of Sir Henry Scott Simpson, Governor of Bengal. She left that job voluntarily to prepare for childbirth and child rearing. The Governor - since retired and in England - was contacted for a reference. He did not know Havildar Haldar, but in his opinion, his mother was completely loyal and trustworthy.

There was another bit of remark on a separate sheet of paper. Haldar was in contact with certain Indian political movements. However, he was not known to have any active participation. It was not considered a mater of concern.

"Now we find out that the Havildar and the Major have - or had - something in common – the Governor House," said Capt. Carruthers. "Isn't this rather odd?"

Colonel Aurora decided that a proposal for an investigation would be in order. If Haldar was involved in any bad business, the investigation would also readily uncover it.

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A few days later Col. Aurora received the telegram he was waiting for, but the message was not what he hoped to see.

FROM IG POLICE SHILLONG
TO COLSSAURORA ASSAM RIFLES AIZAWL

GHQ INDIA FOUND NO MERIT IN YOUR PROPOSAL TO REOPEN INVESTIGATION OF JAPANESE INCIDENT IN AIZAWL STOP NO MERIT FOUND IN YOUR SUGGESTION TO INVESTIGATE THE KALI TEMPLE INCIDENT IN BENGAL STOP BOTH MILITARY DECORATIOINS ARE FOUND TO BE IN ORDER STOP NO MORE SOLDIERS INVOLVED IN EITHER INCIDENT ARE TO BE QUESTIONED STOP YOU ARE DIRECTED TO DROP BOTH MATTERS STOP IG SENDS HIS WARM PERSONAL REGARDS END

Colonel Aurora showed the telegram to Capt. Carruthers. "Captain, the British IG has put a stop to our enquiries. I share your concern for the Major, but there is not much more I can do." The captain stared at the telegram long, and then said: "Sir, you have tried your best, even at considerable risk to yourself. I respect you for that."

"Thank you, Captain. But we both will now have to live with the knowledge that brutal and sadistic murders may have been committed with complete impunity. Not only that. These acts have been rewarded as acts of valor."

"Sir, the strangest thing! The Plassey Kharga, the Kihei Katana and the nameless disease - they no longer add up to so much mumbo-jumbo for me anymore. Instead, I feel great fear for the Major. It is as though justice is coming to him through some superhuman agency. Like some biblical horseman."

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Major Simpson had been present at the base when he heard that a Japanese swordsman was being detained at the base. Uncharacteristically of him, the Major showed no interest in seeing the man or participating in the interview. However, he found out where the man's possessions were being kept, and went to inspect them. The officer on duty said that he had instructions not to let anyone handle these. But the Major said he would accept the responsibility. The officer then produced the knapsack, the sword and the Netsuke-and-Inro. Major Simpson took the sword out of the scabbard and examined it for a long time, feeling with his index finger the sharpness of the edge. He then looked at the knapsack briefly before turning to the Inro. He opened the lid. Inside was a metal box with a tight-fitting lid. The Major pried this open with the sharp blade of the sword. A tiny Jade Buddha fell out. The Major was most fascinated to see the quality and the craftsmanship. He looked at the duty officer who had his back to the Major. The Major palmed the Buddha, and stuffed the empty metal box back inside the Inro. Since no one had looked inside the Inro in the first place, the Buddha was never missed. The empty Inro was returned to its owner. Since the metal box accounted for most of its weight, the owner probably never suspected that the box had been returned empty.

After the Japanese man was released, Maj. Simpson read the interview report. But he never discussed this with anyone. One day he went to the town, and had a jeweler attach the Jade Buddha to a tie-clip. From then on, he always wore the Buddha on his khaki military tie. It looked quite spectacular. People admired it. Only Capt. Carruthers and Col. Aurora wondered about the provenance of the Jade Buddha. Enquiries revealed that Maj. Simpson had indeed been to examine the Japanese man's possessions. However, nothing further was said or done about this.

13

THE CONTENT OF THE TOP SECRET FILE

Masahiro Uramatsu was born Masahiro Ikeda in 1865 in the last days of the Tokugawa Shogunate in Edo, soon to be renamed Tokyo. Ever since he was a child, he heard stories of a great Samurai named Uramatsu Kihei Hidenao Nyudo Ryuyen who displayed great valor and great loyalty to his master. In his later life, this Samurai became a medical doctor and dedicated himself to the service of people. There was a sword in the Ikeda household that Masahiro's father said had once belonged to the Samurai and was given to an ancestor of the family. In time, Masahiro came to decide he also would become a Samurai and follow a similar life path. He took the name Uramatsu. He asked for, and received, the family heirloom sword. In honor of its original wielder, he christened it the Kihei Katana. That name took. All his life, Uramatsu had been approached here and there by people asking to see the famed Kihei Katana. This was Uramatsu's first, last and only sword. Unlike most Samurais, Uramatsu never carried the second, smaller sword called wakizashi.

Uramatsu Kihei Hidenao Nyudo Ryuyen, in woodblock print by Utagawa KUNIYOSHI (17971861)

Even though the Samurai culture and way of life were declining, they continued to linger in remote regions. Uramatsu worked hard at training himself, and by the time he was twenty, he was a full-fledged swordsman. He then floated from employment to employment with a vanishing breed of small warlords.

Life in an Edo castle

He continued in this way until he was about sixty years of age when a life-transforming event occurred. The castle of his then master was attacked by a coalition of rival warlords. Their joint force overwhelmed the castle. Many Samurais died defending their master. Uramatsu, who was the personal guard of the master, had the master hide behind an ornate curtain, and kept watch. But they were found out, and vanquished.

Uramatsu regained consciousness and found that even though he was badly wounded, he had not succumbed to his wounds. His master, however, lay dead - his chest opened wide with a kesa giri sword movement. . This placed the Samurai in great torment. He had failed to save his master, so he should commit seppuku. And yet, he had defended his master and nearly died himself, and so he really did not have anything to be ashamed of. That being the case, seppuku was the wrong thing to do.

In his agony Uramatsu roamed Japan aimlessly for many months until he came to the hills outside Nagasaki, and stopped in a Buddhist monastery for a drink of water and a little rest. He saw that several old monks were living there - too old really to take good care of themselves. In that moment, Uramatsu realized that he had found his place. He told the abbot that he would like to live in the monastery and take care of the monks, in return for room and board - and if possible, a little blessing.

This was the most peaceful time in Uramatsu's life. He had found mental composure and restfulness. More importantly, he had found Buddha Amida. He dedicated the rest of his life to the Buddha. He carefully wrapped the Kihei Katana and put it away in a corner of his room - out of sight.

And something else happened - really the most wonderful thing that happened to him in his life thus far. He met a very young comer to the temple, a girl who said that she was an apprentice Geisha. She gave her name as Yumemaiko, the Dream Geisha-to-be. At his sixty years of age during which he had never known a woman, he felt emotions for this sixteen-year old that he had never felt before. They began to grow closer, and every time she brought him a single flower as she liked to do, he felt he was coming a step closer to knowing this woman. Two things now completely defined Uramatsu: His dedication to Amida and his desire for Yumemaiko. Sometimes he was able to reconcile these. Other times he felt torn between the two. Thus, what really defined him in the end probably was his torment between his two conflicting minds.

The friendship lasted nearly twenty years, and Yumemaiko - who really now should be called Yumegeisha - kept saving a part of herself for Uramatsu even as she practiced her art in the village. Uramatsu was content with that. He enjoyed what was nearly a conjugal bliss. And he treasured the gift of love that he received from her: An ivory box with a cover to be hung from his waistband. It was to be secured with an ivory clasp. These two objects, the Netsuke-and-Inro, were to him as dear as a wedding ring.

One day, a stray enemy bomb took Yumemaiko's young life - along with several fellow Geishas. Uramatsu nearly lost his mind. After a time he pulled himself together, said teary goodbye to the monks, brought out the Kihei Katana, and headed for Tokyo. He left with just the clothes that he had on, and the Netsuke-and-Inro fastened to his waist. In Tokyo he asked to join the army, going from one recruiting center to another. They all showed great respect and thanked him profusely, but told him that at nearly eighty years of age, he was too old to join the army.

One day as he was exiting a recruiting station after a similar rejection, an officer who was sitting there reading a newspaper came out behind him. He asked: "Masahiro Uramatsu, I am Col. Matsumoto. I can see that you are a swordsman. But can you cook and clean?"

"I have done so for twenty years for a monastery full of old monks."

"Good. And can you tell stories?"

"I can tell Shogun stories. I can tell Samurai stories. I can tell Genji stories."

"Very good. Please sit down here with me a moment."

The officer then explained he worked for the Japanese Naval Intelligence. He was about to send four of his men over Malaya and across the Burma border into India, to set up a secret radio installation. Once they were in place, supplies would be dropped by aircraft. After the installation was up and running, it would be a rather routine assignment. But the officer was worried about his men - boys, really. They were fifteen to nineteen years of age. The Colonel felt that if the Samurai wanted to go with them and look after them and tell them stories and in general be their Uncle Masahiro, the officer could get him a civilian post with the Navy. Uramatsu agreed instantly. As they were taking leave, the officer asked: "If you dont mind, just out of curiosity, what do you use the Netsuke-and-Inro for?"

"To keep my soul."

By December of 1944 the spy base was established. The mission for Uramatsu was perfect. He liked the boys as though they were the sons he was never to have. They lived like an integral family - just as the officer back in Tokyo had envisioned. Their Quonset hut was like a single family home. They established a smooth tenor of life, much like homesteaders in a village. But it was not to last. A British surveillance aircraft spotted the installation.

Late one evening in April of 1945 as Uramatsu was returning from the stream carrying two buckets of water in his two hands, he spotted a contingent of five khaki-clad soldiers moving with great stealth towards the Quonset hut. There were four Indian soldiers whose faces he could see. In front of them was a tall soldier that seemed to be the leader. Uramatsu could only see his back. He considered the situation. He did not have his sword with him. He could not reach the hut before the soldiers. And he did not want to create a commotion lest it result in gunfire, killing one or more of the boys. He knew that the boys did not have heavy fire power and would not last even a few minutes against these soldiers. The best course was now for the boys to surrender without fight - as Uramatsu figured they would do. So he moved carefully up to a vantage point from where he could see the yard of the hut.

The soldiers reached the yard, firing their weapons in the air and shouting. Upon this the door of the hut opened and the boys came out one by one in their underclothes, their hands up in the air. They looked now even younger, and quite helpless. The tall soldier - still with his back to Uramatsu - then signaled them to lie down on the ground. When they lay down with their faces down, the soldier nudged them to turn over with their faces up. They did so.

The soldier then came to one of the boys, put his heavy military boot on the boys chest, and asked a question. The boy did not understand it, and gestured so. The officer now pressed down hard with his boot and several of the boys ribs broke, making crackling noise. He screamed and screamed and screamed. The officer listened to this for a while, quite appreciatively as though he were listening to some fine concert. Then he took out his revolver and shot the boy in the head.

He did the same with the two other boys. When he came to the fourth, name of Takashi Yajima, the boy shouted in Japanese: "Uncle Masahiro will cut you in two with a kesa giri." The soldier kept asking him something. And in response, the boy kept shouting: "Kesa giri. Kesa giri. Kesa giri." With his hand, the boy made a diagonal slicing motion from his own left shoulder to the right of his waist, and then pointed to the soldiers chest and made the same motion in the air. The soldier then did the same thing to this last boy as he did to the other three.

Feeling completely numb, Uramatsu still managed to stealthily move through the jungle so that he could get to see the face of the executioner. He made nearly half a circle around the hut, and looked into the yard again. And now he looked straight into the face of the soldier. It was an Englishman, still holding his revolver. Uramatsu memorized that face. The Englishman saw him as well. Uramatsu then made a slicing gesture diagonally across his own chest. He then pointed to the Englishman. A promise was made.

Strangely, Uramatsu thought, that devil of an Englishman did not make any attempts to shoot him there or hunt him down. Uramatsu disappeared into the jungle.

Uramatsu's overwhelming thought now was to keep the promise. He must not show himself and get caught. He knelt in front of the hut, touched his forehead to the ground and made a promise he would return. Within three months after this, he was able to make his way back to Tokyo, and report the incident to Col. Matsumoto. The Colonel just sat there grim-faced and stunned. Uramatsu asked for help to go back and extract revenge. But the Colonel did not respond. Instead, he invited Uramatsu to sit down and have a ceremonial cup of tea in honor of the fallen boys. After that, Uramatsu decided to go back to the monastery, gather his wits, and make his own plans for revenge.

August 9, 1945 changed everything. The monastery was not within the blast zone, but immediately outside of it. Nothing was damaged, but everyone died within two days - after indescribable suffering. The strangest thing was that Uramatsu, who was in exactly same location as the monks, escaped completely unscathed. He showed no signs of diseases or discomfort. On the contrary, he felt that his body temperature was a little higher. Otherwise he felt much younger, much stronger - the way he felt when he was with Yumemaiko.

But the apocalyptic events turned Uramatsu's world upside down, and everything fell out of it. His life was purposeless and rudderless. All he could do is to sit all day in front of the Buddha and pray and look for a sign.

One day that sign came in the shape of a young girl who came visiting the temple. He decided to return to the hills of Aizawl. He got rides on Japanese troop ships and vehicles to Burma. From there he crossed the border on foot near Champhai. He then got a ride with a group of refugees to Aizawl.

14

AN URGENCY DEVELOPS

It was about eight in the evening on Tuesday, and the two friends sat companionably, anticipating a fine meal from Mrs. Khan's kitchen. The fragrance of Basmati rice was already in evidence. The Swami filled the DC in on the day's development. The DC expressed puzzlement on a couple of points. But the Swami said all would be clear soon. Presently, the telephone rang. The maid answered, and then said:

"Sir, this is the SP. He says this is urgent."

The DC took the call. He listened, and his face became taut. He closed the line and turned to the Swami. "There has been another murder, within the last hour. The SP is on his way there. He wondered if you might be interested in visiting the scene. He cautions however that this will be a grim sight even for the strong of stomach."

"I would like to go. But you need not come."

"I will come."

The DC called his wife aside. "Koeli, I dont think we will be in any position to eat when we come back. Please, you and the staff go ahead and eat. Dont wait for us. Im sorry!"

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This night was just one night before Full Moon, and it was bright light outdoors. It revealed the most horrific of sights. The young woman from the village had come to a pond near the edge of the village to fetch water, of which – unexpectedly – she was fresh out. There was nobody else around. She was beheaded with a clean cut.

The SP maintained professional composure. The DC's face was ashen. The Swami betrayed no emotions. He now spoke to the SP. "Andrew, about the past victims. Was there ever any post mortem done on any of them?"

"Actually, no. Since the cause of death was beheading, we did not perform any autopsy or any other medical examinations. We are quite ill-equipped in that area. One of the doctors in the Civil Hospital doubles as a police doctor. But we do not have a Medical Examiner as such. And no laboratory facilities."

"Well, can we have this doctor take a look at this body for certain things?"

The Swami explained to the SP what he wanted done. He also asked the SP to make certain other enquiries. The SP, upon listening, looked at him with great puzzlement, but said that the instructions would be attended to with all due haste. The Swami continued. "About tomorrows program. This

new victim so soon after the last killing makes me think we have no more time. We should not only go up to the hill to talk to the sadhu, but we should try, through him if he knows, to locate the monster and lure him to where we can destroy him. We will have to stay the night on the hill, and try to take care of this matter once and for all.

"So, our plan is radically changed. It is no longer a couple of people hiking up to talk to the sadhu. It is an expedition to destroy the monster. It will have to be a well-equipped expedition, even though we have little time to do this in. Can you handle this?"

"Of course. I will put together the appropriate team."

"Thank you. There are a couple of things I need you to do for me. I hope it is not too late in the evening to attend to these."

The Swami then explained to the SP what he needed. The SP replied: "We will take care of everything. I will see you tomorrow. Goodnight, Maharaj. Goodnight, Sir."

15

THE EXPEDITION

The following day, Wednesday, the party arrived at the DCs bungalow precisely at five am - in a police Jeep and a truck bearing the insignia of the Army. The SP was in the Jeep with his driver and handyman and another person, introduced as Inspector Aichhinga. All three people accompanying the SP were plainclothes policemen. The SP also wore civilian clothes. The driver and the handyman carried .303 Lee Enfield rifles. In the truck were two village elders, a scout, and the driver in military uniform. They were all now introduced to the Swami by the SP. When he came to the driver, the SP said: "This is Lt. Chakma from the Army. He is the marksman you requested."

The Swami shook the Lieutenant's firm hand and said: "I am very pleased you are able to come."

The Lieutenant simply nodded. The Swami sensed that this was not a man of many words. Good, he thought. He must be a man of action then. That is exactly what was needed.

The Swami now said to the village elders: "Thank you for coming. We would like you to witness what happens on the hills in behalf of the entire village. Even if we are able to destroy the monster, we may not be able to bring his body down. In that event, you could assure your fellow villagers that the monster is dead. We will see that you remain safe up there. However, you do understand that there is some danger?"

The elders nodded.

The scout named Lalzama was quite young, and carried a large Nepali kukri. The Swami surmised this was to clear brush on the jungle trails.

The SP now handed the Swami a folded dark maroon chador – a color that stood in sharp contrast to the Swami's subdued saffron attire.

Close behind these vehicles came a third one carrying the DC and Capt. Carruthers. The DC called SP to one side and spoke in a low voice: "Colonel Aurora felt that it would be wise to have a British officer involved in this expedition, especially if it were anything to do with Maj. Simpson. I agree."

"As you wish, Sir," replied the SP and went over and shook hands with the Captain.

Just before the party set out, Mrs. Khan appeared with two servants carrying picnic lunches and dinners, some fruits, and large containers full of ready-made tea. She told the scout to heat up the tea in a campfire on the hill. Several cups and plates were provided. The SP gave each person his own canteen of drinking water to carry.

The DC did not join this party. He wanted the SP to be not only in official charge of the expedition, but to actually feel that he was in charge.

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About an hour and a half's journey on bridle roads brought the expedition to a dry streambed at the foot of the hill - providing best access to the ruins. No sooner did they arrive there than they saw a military Jeep parked in one corner - nearly secreted. The Swami, the SP and the Captain went over to inspect. The Jeep had its canvas top on and it had been rained on – raindrops were still evident all over it except on the engine hood. The tire marks had been muddied by rain. Since it had rained late last evening, it appeared that the Jeep had been there all night. Since the raindrops on the engine hood had dried, the vehicle could not have been there much longer than that. The Captain recognized the Jeep and said: "Major Simpson. He must have started last night - perhaps to beat us to the hilltop."

On the floor of the Jeep, in front of the passenger seat, there was a pair of ladies shoes - the kind of strapped shoes worn for normal usage. It looked as though a woman had accompanied the driver here, and then changed into different shoes – perhaps shoes suitable for hiking on the hill. The Swami asked the SP: "Yesterday Maj. Simpson told us he would be driving one Lady Wyndmere around town. But why would they come here? Is there a way to check if the Lady is all right?"

"We can try to reach the Station on the walkie-talkie and ask them to find out. But I am not sure the walkie-talkie would work at this distance."

Inspector Aichhinga tried the walkie-talkie several times, but was unable to raise the police station on it. Then the SP told the Swami: "The only other thing we can do is to go back and check. Should we want to do that?"

"On balance, I think not. Let us be on our way."

The party left the vehicles here. The two villagers and the driver and the handyman together carried the comestibles and other necessities, including - at the Swami's request - a gallon-size container of petrol. The Swami carried in a side-bag the maroon chador and his cigarettes. The SP carried a rifle in addition to his revolver. The Lieutenant had a three-naught-three rifle with telescopic sight slung over his left shoulder. It was a Lee Enfield rifle that had been modified for sniper application. In his right hand he carried a folded stand for steadying the rifle.

Scout Lalzama led the way up the hill, clearing brush with his kukri and occasionally consulting the army compass hung from a string around his neck. The climb continued in silence. Occasionally, Lalzama called a rest stop. As they climbed, the forest got denser and darker and cooler. Fortunately, everybody had warm clothes, and the Swami had a woolen sweater under his kurta. Everyone had raingear, a necessity this time of the year. It actually rained a couple of times, but only for a brief few minutes, and only very lightly.

At one rest stop, the Swami took out his tin of cigarettes and offered it to everyone. The village elders accepted, with thanks. They took due notice that these were Capstan cigarettes. There was now some casual chitchatting, giving everyone a better group feeling as well as a sense of safety in number. But the real and present horror was never very far from anyone's mind. The coldness of the jungle became equated with the shiver of fear. The darkness of the canopy became a grim foreboding.

The hike continued through the ever-denser-becoming jungle whose canopy filtered out the sunlight so much that it looked like early evening. But this was in fact mid morning, and the jungle was still quiet. Crickets and cicadas could not be heard. But the birds were busy hopping from branch to branch. Occasionally, the trail came close to an unseen rill whose liquid lilt could be heard. Now and then, the Swami spotted wonderful wild orchids, the likes of which he had seen only in hothouses, if he had seen at all. He kept looking around so as not to miss a single orchid that had bloomed. And it was thus that his eyes locked with two eyes deep in the jungle foliage - eyes that he thought he knew. But he also sensed in these eyes an appeal: Do not give me away. The Swami pretended not to have seen anything, and looked at the trail ahead. It was at this point that the Swami saw that the SP was observing him.

Doll by Chaitali Roy

The scout walked about twenty feet ahead, and then the rest of the party walked together in a tight formation. Nobody spoke. Suddenly the scout held up his left hand, signaling the party to stop. He then peered into the foliage to his right, and walked back to the group. He asked to speak to the SP alone. When the two moved away from the group, the scout whispered: "Sir, I can see two feet under the brushes - they look like the feet of a man in military uniform, lying on the ground."

The SP turned to the group and asked everyone to wait where they were. "You too, Lalzama," he said to the scout. Then he added: "You all might use this time to rest and relax. Stay in a tight group. There is a matter Capt. Carruthers and I need to look into."

The SP now borrowed Lalzama's kukri. He took it in his left hand, and drew his revolver with the right. He held the revolver at the ready, with the barrel pointing up. The Captain removed his rifle from the shoulder, pushed the bolt home and held it at waist level with two hands, with the barrel pointing down. The two now entered the area the scout had pointed to. The party stretched and rested, and the tension was relieved when people started to converse.

Almost half an hour passed before the two officers reemerged from the area. The faces of these two brave men now looked ashen, drained of blood. They stood silent for a few seconds as if to compose themselves, and then the SP spoke. "That was Maj. Simpson, dead. It seems that he stumbled in the dark, and hit the back of his head on a rock. He seems to have died of that wound. But there has been some animal activity over the night, and scene is most horrific. We have covered up the Major's body with brush and foliage, for now.

"I have decided against posting a man here, or sending a man down immediately to get help. To do so would place him in danger. And the Major is beyond help, anyway. We will decide what to do about the body on our way down tomorrow."

On this, the ever-present sense of foreboding was greatly magnified, and everyone fell silent again as the trek resumed. People pulled whatever warm clothes they were wearing tighter around them. The Swami was deeply absorbed in thought. He also noticed that the SP was avoiding his eyes.

Very shortly after that stop, the party arrived at the edge of a day-lit clearing. The stark light of day heartened everyone. The clearing offered the view of the ruins at the other end. It was some type of bamboo-and-mud hut that by now had nearly crumbled. Nevertheless, it displayed the semblance of a door, and the hint of an inner sanctum behind it. The Swami asked everyone to stay behind the tree line, and the SP to accompany him. He asked the SP to leave his rifle behind and move the revolver in his belt to his backside where it would not be visible from the front.

The two now looked like a perfectly harmless, unthreatening pair. They approached the ruins. When they were at the door, the Swami thumped on the decaying door, calling out: "Anybody home?" Both of them then heard some noise from inside, but no one came to the door. The Swami then pushed the door open, and said loudly: "Vajraninad, this is your friend Meghaswami from Sylhet. Please come out."

Now a small, bearded man - looking emaciated and spent - approached the door. He peered uncertainly at the bright light in the clearing. He stood there a few seconds grasping the situation, then rushed out and hugged the Swami as hard as he could. He then broke down, weeping uncontrollably. The Swami let him weep on.

A couple of minutes passed. Then the man spoke, his voice still the voice of thunder: "Maghaswami, you are too late, too late, too late, too late..."

"The monster got her?" asked the Swami.

"Yes."

"Vajraninad, we do not have any time to lose. Please get a hold of yourself, and tell us everything you know about this, every detail, starting with why you came here."

The Swami led the man by hand to the center of the clearing, and sat him down on a large piece of log there. He then signaled the rest of the party to come forward. When they did, he asked Lalzama to heat up some tea.

When this was done, the Swami gave the man a large cup of steaming tea and two huge sandwiches. The man simply wolfed down the sandwiches as though he had not eaten for days. Then the tea seemed to revive him considerably. By this time everyone had a cup of tea in hand. The party sat down on the ground in a half-circle around the man. Now the Swami said: "Everyone, this is a man I have long known. His name is Vajraninand, and as you can tell from his saffron clothes, he is a holy man. I want you all to listen closely to what he has to say, for your life may depend on it. Please do not interrupt. And please do not tell him about anything you may have seen on the way here. I want him to tell his story with a clear, restful mind."

16

VAJRANINAD'S NARRATIVE

The Swami may not have realized it, but he had occupied a large place in the life of Vajraninad and Sapnabhairavi. When the Swami left his monastic order, the two felt greatly distressed, thinking that they were partly to blame. And when the Swami left Sylhet, the two felt a great emptiness in their lives. They resolved to move, and this time as far away from human habitation as they could. They craved nature, solitude, open sky - and in all these, that spiritual fulfillment to whose quest they had dedicated their lives. Of the two, Sapnabhairavi was more enamored of this plan when it was first discussed, and wanted to execute it as soon as possible.

They discussed their wish openly with their devotees. Although the latter were saddened by this decision, they nevertheless provided many helpful suggestions: Tea gardens of Srimangal, the high plains of Halflong and Maibong in North Cachar Hillsand so on. However, Maj. Simpson made a very specific and very attractive suggestion.

From his familiarity with Aizawl, Maj. Simpson knew of a particular hill outside of the town that was simply a piece of private paradise: All around – three hundred and sixty degrees – were lush green hills where orchids bloomed wild. If the sun warmed the hills during the day, the moon bathed them at night. To add to this, there was an abandoned building in a flat clearing, and a fresh water stream close by. The pair could live there, grow vegetables and flowers, raise poultry for eggs and goats for milk, hardly ever needing to come down to the foothill villages. And if they did need supplies, it was an hour's hike to the villages. But they would live in complete isolation in the lap of nature, as though there were no others on the Earth. Major Simpson sweetened his offer by saying he could arrange passage for the two in military convoys, and arrange for a scout to lead them to the abandoned building. He would even see to it that the image of Kali was safely transported there.

Vajraninand was immediately taken by this idea but to his surprise, it was Sapnabhairavi who resisted. She privately told him that she did not trust Maj. Simpson to do right by them. Vajraninad – who preferred to look only at the good side in all – tried to convince her that she was being unduly harsh on the Major. After much pleading, she agreed.

So it came to pass that they were here. Their devotees had raised for them a great deal of money so that they would be set for a long time. The pair brought with them carefully planned supplies, especially saplings and seeds of vegetables and flowers. They started gardening right away, on plots behind the hut. While they were acquainting themselves with their new surrounding, Vajraninad went to the village once a week to get supplies. Sapnabhairavi stayed home, for the hike was rather strenuous for her.

A few weeks passed in idyllic bliss. They did not find the solitude too overwhelming as they had feared. Life was happy and full. The things they planted started sprouting healthily. They put the image of the Goddess Kali on a temporary altar, and planned to build a more elaborate temple to her in the clearing. The pair had to get used to their jungle environment, especially the noises at night, the howling, the hooting, the growling.

One day when Vajraninad was coming back from the stream with a pitcher of water, and regretting that he waited until so late in the day do it – for it had got dark – he thought he saw a strange human-like beast behind the trees. As he looked at it, it moved with lightning speed and disappeared. But all the way home, Vajraninad had the feeling that the beast was following him home. This incident made a deep impression in his mind, but he did not tell Sapnabhairavi about this sighting or about his fears.

The following Sunday Vajraninad went to the village, and told Sapnabhairavi that he would bring her a bottle of scented hair oil. She smiled sweetly. He did his grocery shopping, ordered the hair oil which was not in stock, then spent all day going from village to village, assessing the price of poultry. It got dark as he was returning. When he came home, Sapnabhairavi was gone. There was no trace of her anywhere. But there lingered a most horrific, beastly smell - akin to the smell of rotten flesh. It was like a smell that came from the very depths of hell.

Vajraninad was heartbroken, devastated and angered, and at the same time, a sense of utter helplessness came over him. He lit a hurricane lantern, and searched the grounds around the hut in ever-widening circles. But to no avail. He rested some, and then resumed this activity again – all the time calling out her name. In time, it became light. That brought a measure of renewed energy. He started his search again, this time looking for any signs of which way Sapnabhairavi might have gone or was taken. There was none.

Vajraninad now resolved to approach the problem calmly and logically. He came back to the hut, and examined both the inside and the immediate outside. There were no marks of anyone being dragged anywhere. So, Sapnabhairavi either walked or was carried. He dismissed the first possibility. Then he thought, if she was carried away, it had to be a man rather than a predatory animal. Therefore, Vajraninad had to look for some kind of man-made structure nearby where she might be held. Since he, by now, knew the area downhill from here quite well, and also the area around here, he resolved to trek uphill. He took the large machete he had for clearing bushes, and set out.

About an hour's hike brought him to the local peak of the hill. As he scanned his eyes over the peek, he spotted some type of a man-made installation. There were several tall metal poles cross-connected to each other, and there was a small Quonset hut, the quick-assembly shed used by the military. It was all overgrown with vegetation. However, the immediate area in front of the hut was clear, indicating signs of use. Vajraninad waited a while, and listened for any sounds or movement. When he heard none, he stealthily approached an open window of the hut that he could see. As he reached the window and put his face up to it, that horrible stench of putrid flesh nearly physically pushed him back. He took a few seconds to recover, covered his nose and mouth, and looked in again.

Vajraninad saw what he was dreading. The hut was largely empty, but on the floor in the far corner were strewn the clothes of Sapnabhairavi. There were no signs of her. This sight drove him mad, and he forgot all about his personal safety. With his machete raised, he rushed onto the flimsy door which gave away. He entered the hut, covering his nose and mouth with the end of his chador. All he could see now, besides what he already saw, are piles of rotting flesh here and there. He also recognized some human body parts.

Vajraninad staggered out, and collapsed in the yard. When he regained consciousness, he started to think. What could he do now? Go scouting further, return to his place and wait, or wait right here for the occupant of the Quonset hut to return? He decided upon the last course. He went behind the tree line, and chose a large tree with spreading, leafy canopy. He climbed, found a sturdy junction of two limbs, and settled down there – completely hidden from view.

They day grew to noon and then afternoon and then dusk. It got cool, and Vajraninad pulled the chador tight around his body. Slowly, it became dark. He kept his eyes peeled to the yard and the entry area of the hut. Presently he heard the stealthy noise of a large animal moving through brush. What he saw next caused him nearly to fall off the tree, but he managed to steady himself without making any noise.

There - in the darkness dispelled only by a crescent moon – emerged from behind the tree line nothing less than a minion of the Devil himself, a veritable rakkhosh. Really and truly a rakkhosh, and not something that looked like a rakkhosh. It was a huge ape-like creature, slightly hunched over from the load he was carrying on his shoulder. The load was a fully-n*ak*ed Sapnabhairavi. The entire body of the rakkhosh had a grainy, dull glow, as though covered by a thousand illuminated buttons. His eyes and the neck and the shoulders were covered by thick strands of matted hair that looked like thick ropes. In place of beard, fern fronds were hanging from his face in a tightly woven fashion. He was completely n*ak*ed, but a long sword in a scabbard was tied to some type of a sash or a belt around his waist. As he came closer, Vajraninad saw that he had no lower or upper lip, and his teeth were fully exposed, red-stained and sharp. He now got a fresh whiff of that stench. The rakhkosh went inside the hut and closed the door behind him.

Vajraninad prayed to Kali to give him strength, and climbed down as stealthily as he could. He came to the open window and looked. The sight he saw caused him to faint for a few seconds. He looked again. The rakkhosh was right next to the window, and so, clearly visible. He was ravishing Swapnabhairabhi, who appeared to be lying unconscious. The rakkhosh kept repeating, in a voice that sounded almost animal-like, something that sounded like Uma-ma-ko, Uma-ma-ko. At that moment, Sapnabvhairavi opened her eyes and looked at Vajraninad from under the rak'khosh, and her eyes locked with his for a mere second. He saw the most sad, helpless and supplicant look he ever saw - pleading and at the same time resigned. That look became seared in his memory. He knew that as long as he lived, this stare would haunt him.

In a huge surge of rage Vajraninad broke into the hut, his machete raised high. But as soon as the rakkhosh heard the noise behind him, he rose with lightning speed, while at the same time fully drawing his sword. Vajraninad saw that the sword was about to dissect him. But suddenly the rakkhosh froze. He looked at Vajraninad up and down and sheathed his sword. Vajraninad lost consciousness completely.

When he came to, he found that he was laid out in front of his own door. He rose in a daze, and managed to carry himself to the stream. He washed himself all over again and again and yet once again. The cold water revived him. But he wished it had not, for the events of the night all came back to him and again sapped him of all energy - of his will to live a moment further. Since then, he had

been going everyday to the Quonset hut, and roaming the area around there as well as here. But there was no sign whatsoever of Sapnabhairavi.

Vajraninad stopped, lowered his head, and started weeping and convulsing. The Swami put his hands on his shoulders. He then addressed the party. "Let us take a break. Stretch your legs or have lie-down. In about an hour we will start our hike to the Quonset hut, and station ourselves there for the night. In the meantime, I will go for a walk with Vajraninad, and see his gardens."

At this time the SP stood up and said: "Just one moment, Maharaj, before you go..."

He turned to Vajraninad and said: "I am Police Superintendent Zoramthanga. Do you know anything about a dead-body we found just down the hill?"

The sadhu shook his head to indicate he did not. Then the SP asked: "I saw a shattered clay image of the goddess Kali just inside your door. What is that about?"

"I am not sure. The rakkhosh may have come in my absence and done that."

17

DREAM OR NIGHTMARE?

The Swami and Vajraninad walked around the hut to the gardens behind it. The Swami had that puzzled look on his face that meant that he was not grasping the situation. He had developed a feel for this whole business, and Vajraninad's narrative just shattered it all. He now realized that he may have made a serious mistake by essentially forcing Vajraninad to tell his story to the whole group. Who knows what inhibitions Vajraninad might have had? Bad mistake! The village elders heard the gruesome story about the rakkhosh, and that is the story that would propagate.

Vajraninad started to say something about the gardens, but the Swami interrupted. "This is not about the gardens. I need to ask you several questions. Please answer me fully and truthfully."

Vajraninad understood. He replied: "May Kali the Mother punish me for lying to the Superintendent, but I do not know what came over me. I killed the Major in self-defense, and I should have said so."

"How did you kill him?"

"I hit him on the back of his head with a rock."

"We will square the facts with the Superintendent. But tell me what happened."

The two sat down on the ground, and Vajraninad began. "The story I told about the rakkhosh is true except that he did not hurt Sapna at all. He took her that evening perhaps because she reminded him of someone. He took her to the Quonset hut and sat near her all night. Before first light, he took her to a dark cave and stayed there all day. Sapna was unconscious most of the time. When I saw them in the hut through the window, he was just sitting next to her, and calling her by that name, Uma-Mako. But I flew into a rage and attacked him.

"After he left me in front of my door, he went back and returned with Sapna. He was always carrying her carefully wrapped in wild banana leaves so as to prevent his ooze from rubbing off on her.

"After that, the rakkhosh often stopped by in the evenings. He sat crouching in the clearing, and kept looking at our door. If Sapna or I came out, he bowed as low as to the ground. In time, we got used to him. To us, he was completely harmless."

The Swami interrupted. "Why do you call him a rakkhosh? Have you heard anyone else refer to him thus?"

"No. That is just the image that came to mind when I first saw him."

"And all this business about human body parts - not true, is it?"

"No."

"Go on."

"A couple of months ago - I can no longer keep track of time - one morning Sapna and I were sitting in front of Ma Kali and getting ready for the morning worship when a soldier turned up at the door. I saw that Sapna looked at him with surprised recognition, and exclaimed most joyfully: “Shachin-da!”. I then realized that this was a welcome visitor. But before I could say any words of welcome, the soldier pushed me down to the ground, and taking some rope from his pocket, tied my hands and feet together. This completely incapacitated me, but left me in a position to helplessly witness what was going on. I shouted out to Sapna to run and hide in the jungle. But she would not leave me. She tried ineffectually to stop the soldier. He then proceeded to ravish Sapna vigorously. When I told the group about the way she looked at me from the Quonset hut, I was actually telling you about the way she looked at me now. If anything could tear my heart out and throw it away, that look did.

"After the soldier was done and got up, Sapna was bleeding profusely. He looked at me, grinned and, pointing to Sapna, said: ‘Compliments of Maj. Simpson! He sent me. I am Havildar Haldar!’

"He continued. 'When I killed your brother the priest of the kali Temple, he promised that I would die by that khargha. It has not happened. Now I have assaulted your woman right before your eyes, and she will die soon. What is inside her will also die. I will let you live, and I will leave you the kharga. Let us see what your goddess can do to me. You will not understand this, but this is Kali vs. Chhin'nomosta!'

"He left. Sapna found enough strength to drag herself to me and untie me. But shortly after that, she said very feebly 'Goodbye, my chosen man,' and was gone. I cremated her at the far end of the garden.

"Perhaps now you can see why I lied to your group. There were military people there – and I cannot and do not trust them."

"Did the monster come back after Sapnabhairavi died?"

"Yes, he kept coming. When he did not see Sapnabhairavi for several visits in a row, he approached me with hand signals, wanting to know where she was. I then took him to the cremation ground and showed him the ashes. Upon that, he sat down flat on the ground, looking totally despondent. He stayed like that for hours. Then he got up, and looked at me questioningly. I managed to explain to him with signs – making motions of pulling out a revolver from a holster and so on that she was raped and killed by a soldier. He seemed to understand. He patted his sword, and made a motion of cutting a man diagonally in half. I then pointed to his sword and shook my head to say no. I showed him the Polashi Kharga, and nodded my head to say yes. He seemed to understand. He bowed deeply, backed away and left. I never saw him again."

For a long time nobody spoke. Then the Swami began, changing the subject completely. "Vajraninad, why did you two come up here? I understand all that about seeking solitude and silence, and I understand that you are at this particular place because the Major referred you here, but there is more to this, is not there?"

"Sapnabhairavi was pregnant. She was going to have an Anglo-Indian child. And no matter how the child was begotten, she dearly wanted to have that baby. But the fetus was crushed to death. The Major had promised us that if we went into seclusion and no one knew about the baby, then he would later adopt it and give it the full benefit and right of an English home. I now think that the Major had all along planned to destroy us up here on the hill."

"The Major forced himself on Sapnabhairavi? What did she say exactly about that?"

"Sapnabhairavi said that he had seduced her. I do not know if that is the same thing as forcing."

"And you did nothing to protect her?"

"She did not tell me until later. The rape and murder of her and her unborn child by the Major's minion are the reason why I, a man of god, found the will to kill the Major."

"Go on, if you can," said the Swami.

"Very late last night I returned from aimlessly roaming in the jungle. As I looked at my hut just before entering the clearing, I saw in bright moonlight a man standing at the door - revolver in hand. He was looking into the hut. I picked up a heavy rock, and stealthily came closer and recognized that it was Maj. Simpson. I hit him on the back of his head as hard as I could. He fell forward against the image of Kali, toppling and breaking it. It was then that I noticed that the Polashi Kharga was missing. The Major now was completely motionless and not breathing. I considered the situation, and decided to drag the Major's body away from the hut, and into a small clearing in the jungle next to the trail you took up here."

"Why did you do that?"

"I did not want to be arrested for the murder before I had a chance to reinstall Ma Kali."

Vajraninad stopped, and did not resume his account. The Swami said: "All right. Please continue."

"There is not much more to tell, except for the nightmarish dream – which is of no relevance."

"Tell me anyway."

"By the time I moved the Major's body, I was extremely exhausted and panting for breath. I sat down at the base of a large tree, facing the Major’s body, and fell asleep. Then I had the most macabre dream. I saw the Major stand up, look around him, and freeze. Then I saw what he saw. From his left, there approached him the rakkhosh – with his sword raised in the attack stance. From his right approached him Sapnabhairavi, holding the kharga in front of her, pointing up. She came close to the Major, stood directly in front of him – as if to give him a chance to properly view the kharga. Then she turned the kharga so that the Major could view the other side. Now she faced the rakkhosh and the two crossed their blades. I heard the clang. Then, with movements that seemed almost ritualistic, the rakkhosh positioned himself facing the Major. Sapnabhairavi stood behind the Major. The Major

stood at attention, straightened his tie and made a cross sign across his chest. Then, in an instant, both swung at the same time. But the Major kept standing at attention. A few seconds later, his body fell to the ground in three pieces.

"The last thing I remember is Sapnabhairvai shaking me and asking again and again: 'Vajraninad, Vajraninad, who killed the mother and the baby?' I managed to answer: 'Havildar Sachin Haldar.' Then I think I said something else about the kharga and went back into deep sleep. I must have sleepwalked or something, for when I woke up, I was in the hut and it was late morning. I had no energy to get up and face the day. So I just stayed in bed until you and the Superintendent came to the door."

"Are you absolutely sure it was Sapnabhairavi you saw?"

"Yes. But now there was something unusual about her eyes that I could see in the bright moonlight. Her eyes had become mysterious."

"Tell me one thing. In spite of the pregnancy, you never blamed her, and continued to treat her just as caringly and lovingly as ever?"

"Absolutely. I loved this woman so deeply that if she found pleasure somehow in some way, it was my pleasure also. I said I would welcome the baby most warmly."

"Thank you for telling me that."

Another long period of silence, and then Vajraninad asked his friend: "Meghaswami, that day at the Quonset hut, when the rakkhosh was sitting there with Sapna and I attacked him, why did he not kill me?"

"Because of your monk's attire."

18

THE VIGIL AT THE QUONSET HUT

Vajraninad led the party up and over the hilltop to the Quonset hut. This was the night of Full Moon, and the hill was beginning to light up beautifully in that soft glow. But no one now was in any position to appreciate beauty. Stark terror was on everyone's mind. Vajraninad's narrative left many of the members of the party nearly catatonic. The Swami addressed the party.

"If the monster shows up at all, it will be sometime before first light. Our best approach is for all of us to stay together in one place. So, let the Lieutenant choose where he wants to set up his station, then everybody stay near him. Do not under any circumstances stray from the group. If you have to answer any nature's calls, do so now.

"Now, Lieutenant, here is my plan. After the night is well under way, I will go to the courtyard and do something to lure the monster to show himself. I will try to get him to hold still as long as I can. You take your shot as soon as you can."

The Lieutenant spoke now for the first time. "Whatever you do, Maharaj, stay out of my line of fire."

The Swami nodded, and then said: "If it comes to a choice between destroying the monster and saving me, destroy him."

The SP now asked what the Swami's plans were. The Swami replied: "Let me show you."

He went behind a tree and rearranged his clothing. Then he draped the neatly folded maroon chador over his lighter, saffron attire. When he emerged before the group, he looked like a typical Buddhist lama. His already-shaved head brought further authenticity to this image. He now explained. "The problem with destroying the monster thus far has been two-fold. First, finding him, and second, finding him in one place long enough to take a fatal shot. He moves with lightning speed. Today we have come to his lair, and we hope we will find him. But how do we hold him still long enough to get a shot?

"From the descriptions of the sightings of the monster I heard from the villagers, I concluded that this is - or once used to be - a Samurai swordsman from Japan. I concluded this from his stances of holding the sword. For some reason he has come to Aizawl and is living on this hill. He has thrived on animal meats - raw and putrid - and this has given him hideous diseases. This is why he looks the way he looks today.

"From the little knowledge that I have of the Samurai culture, I know that these are fierce warriors. But they also have deeply held values. One of these is their devotion to the Buddha. My theory is that even though this creature has undergone great physical transformation, somewhere deep in deep of his psyche, his original belief system remains.

"Actually, we have had some corroboration of this theory from the story of Vajraninad. The monster did not kill Vjraninad when he could, in spite of the fact that Vajraninad attacked him. I think this is because of my friend's saffron attire of a monk.

"So my plan is to sit in the courtyard in the posture of the meditating Buddha. I remember very vividly a woodcarving of the Buddha I once saw. I will assume that pose. I hope that will draw him to come closer, and to make him forget - even for a split second – his finely honed instinct for self-preservation. Then the Lieutenant will have his split second."

The SP was listening with great interest, seeing how the Swami was able to present a most plausible story about the Samurai without ever using any facts he had learned from the Top Secret report. He now said: "Maharaj, you dont have to do this, and we cannot ask you to do this. Perhaps one of us official people can wear your clothes and strike that posture. We are after all paid to take risks. Please reconsider if you wish to proceed."

To this the Swami replied with a smile: "Superintendent, I do not think you could pull it off. Leave the Buddha-acting to me."

As it started to get darker in the jungle, the moon seemed to get brighter. The full disk shone overhead. The whole courtyard was well lit. The Lieutenant checked again that there was enough light for his telescopic sight to work. He now chose a place directly across the courtyard from the hut, set up his

stand on its two legs and rested the rifle barrel on it. He put a single bullet in the magazine, and slid it home. It was now time to wait.

19

THE HORROR

Everyone helped collect some large boulders and accumulate them at the center of the courtyard. By strategically arranging them, a makeshift altar was created on which the Swami could sit without great discomfort. At about eight pm, the Swami settled himself on this rock formation, facing the Lieutenant. This gave him a nearly 270 degrees view of the jungle around him, with the hut directly behind him. He then assumed a blissful position of the Buddha, with one hand raised in benediction and one leg pendent. The rest of the group huddled just a few feet behind the Lieutenant who now crouched comfortably behind his rifle, looking completely relaxed.

Nine pm went by, and then ten pm. Nothing happened. A jackal came by and created some commotion - but that was all. The Swami now needed to get up and stretch his legs. Others might need a break too, he thought. Just as he was about to move his nearly cramped legs, he caught through the corner of his left eye a very slight movement behind the trees. He dared not turn his head, but continued to monitor that spot through the corner of his eye. Presently, he smelled that reviling stench that he recognized from having been inside the hut a while ago. This was it.

For a couple of seconds, all of the Swamis courage left him. He wondered if this had been a good idea at all, and if it was now workable. After hearing the real story from Vajraninad, he had doubts as to whether the monster needed to be destroyed. He now reminded himself that many people were counting on his leadership. He was the adventurer-in-chief. He reminded himself how Krishna told Arjuna not to go all weak-in-the-knees when the hard call to just battle came. All fear left him. He was ready for action. He kept his Buddha stance and waited.

Another slight movement, and he now saw the presence of a dark mass behind the trees. Suddenly, with three somersaults executed with lightning speed, the monster reached him, staying in a crouched position. He had stopped right behind the Swami, between him and the hut. The Swami had no choice but to turn and face him. He was now looking directly at what could be described as a sight that would surely frighten a child to instant death. With great effort the Swami controlled himself from retching. So strong was the stench now that he stopped breathing. What was before him was a rotting corpse – a grotesque, hairy, glowing man-beast-plant.

Before the Swami had time to do anything the monster - staying in his crouched position - joined his palms and started to make sounds that sounded like an animals growling. But the Swami recognized the underlying word: AmidaAmidaAmida... His eyes were the only thing that still had a human quality, and there was now in them a sad supplication. The Swami understood, and stood up straight and raised his right hand in blessing. At that moment, he realized that even if his stratagem worked and the monster stood up with him, the Swami was still blocking the Lieutenant's line of fire. No sooner did he realize this than the monster stood up with incredible speed, and in that same motion, drew his sword. The Swami knew that in a split second the sword was going to cut him in half - diagonally through his torso. It was his fault. The Lieutenant had reminded him not block the line of fire. His adventure had ended. He closed his eyes and prepared for the feel of the sword on his left shoulder.

But instead he heard a single report of rifle fire, and felt the wake of the bullet whizzing past, just above his shaved head. He opened his eyes to see the monster's head explode in a thousand little pieces. Pieces of bone and brain matter and fern and moss were flying all around. He thought he even saw a small orchid. The Swami realized that the monster was taller than him, and the Lieutenant – lying on the ground – probably saw only a few inches of the monster's head projecting above the Swami's. He felt thankful that the quiet Lieutenant had the confidence to fire perhaps just an inch over his head.

All these thoughts passed through the Swami's mind within the blink of an eye. For even as the mist created by the monsters exploded head was clearing, the Swami saw something that petrified him. The monsters sword movement was arrested only for the tiniest of moment. The headless monster's sword resumed its movement along the preplanned arc, striking not the Swami's shoulder, but the monsters own stomach. The hand plunged the sword so hard that its tip came out at the back. Obviously the continuation of the sword movement was due to some nervous mechanism. But the Swami understood now what happened: The monster asked for the Buddha's forgiveness, and then committed seppuku. He was not attacking the Swami at all.

And he now saw what really happened. The monster did not draw his blade in a sword grip. Instead, he had drawn it with a dagger grip, which meant that he wanted to commit seppuku even as he drew. It was absolutely clear that Swami was never in any danger.

As the body now collapsed to the ground, the Swami saw the only other objects on the monster besides the sword: the Netsuke-and-Inro, and something else stuck to the sash. The Swami thought he knew what it was, but by now all his senses were on extreme overdrive, and he fainted.

20

TWO HASTY CREMATIONS

When he came to, the Swami saw the SP sprinkling water on his face. He asked the SP: "How long have I been out? I hope no one has gone near the body?"

"Only a minute. And no, no one has gone near the body. I asked them not to."

Now Lalzama gave the Swami a glass of cold tea. The Swami eagerly gulped it down. Then Lalzama stuck one if Swami's own cigarettes between his lips, and lighted it. The Swami took a long puff and said: "Thank you all. I am fine now."

The Swami looked around and saw the Lieutenant carefully packing his gear. He said to the latter: "Lieutenant, ..."

"Maharaj, I am not sure I should have taken that shot. How can you kill someone who is about to take his life, and live with yourself?" said the Lieutenant.

"Lieutenant, let me tell you something little I have read about the way of the Samurai. When a Samurai decides to commit seppuku, he invites a close friend to be his Second. This is a position of honor. The Second stands behind the Samurai, with his sword at the ready. As soon as the Samurai plunges his dagger into his belly, the Second cuts his head off. That way, he performs an act of kindness by sparing the Samurai the agony of slow, painful death. You, Lieutenant, were this Samurai's Second."

The Lieutenant listened, but did not respond. He would not speak again during the expedition.

The Swami now told the SP in a low, private voice: "I think that the most we can do now is burn those remains – sword and all. We will leave at first light, and you can then have experts do what more needs to be done here."

The SP asked everyone to help him gather anything combustible – brush, dry tree branches and so on – and pile them up in one corner of the yard. When this was done, the three policemen carefully tossed these onto the remains of the monster from a distance, thus building up a pyre. Half the petrol in the can was sprinkled on to this pile, and it was set aflame. Even as the fire was raging, most of the party - relieved and relaxed – dosed off. So did the Swami. Only the SP and the Captain stayed awake, and watched the fire lest it spread to the jungle.

At first light Lalzama heated up the rest of the tea and everyone got about a quarter of a cup. Even that was most welcome. Thus revived, the group packed up and started the journey back.

The Swami signaled to Vajraninad to stay back for a moment, and said to the group: "Please go on ahead. We will join up with you in a minute." When they were out of sight, the Swami told Vajraninad: "They all think the dead man lying before us is a vicious killer. But you and I, we now

have doubts. We should give him some type of last rite. Please join me in chanting a Buddhist prayer I know." He faced the pyre area, and both of them joined their palms and lowered their heads. The Swami and Vajraninad then sang:

Buddham saranam gacchami.
Dhammam saranam gacchami.
Sangham saranam gacchami.

When they were finished, the Swami said: "We will have to say the prayer four more times." They did, and proceeded to join the group.

This early in the morning, the jungle had a very different feel. It was absolutely quiet. No cricket sounds, no bird chirps, no owl hootings. The only faint sound he could hear was that of an unseen rill. There was a slight chill in the air, and the silence brought a mystic aura to this chill. The smell of the jungle was rather subdued, and had a votive quality to it. "This is the hour the hermit wakes," recalled the Swami from something he had read recently.

As they passed Vajraninad's cottage, the Swami asked him if he needed to pick up anything before leaving that place for good. Vajraninad went in, and the Swami and the SP followed him in. Vajraninad first picked up a small piece from the shattered image of Kali - this would be incorporated into a new image at another time, a new place. He then collected a few things in a small bundle, leaving most of his possession – such as they were – behind. When he was finished, the Swami spoke. "Let us say Goodbye to Sapnabhairavi."

The three of them walked behind the ruins and through the vegetable garden to the edge of the jungle. The patch of ashes was still visible. They stood silently for a minute. Then the Swami and Vajraninad assumed the prayer posture again. The SP stood erect with his head lowered. The Swami recited a verse from the Bhagavad Gita:

Vasamsi jirnani yatha vihaya navani grihnati narohparani
Tatha sarirani vihaya jirnany anyani samyati navani dehi.

He said it twice. When he was finished, Vajraninand bent down and scooped up some ash and soil to take with him, along with the shattered piece of Kali. As they started back to rejoin the group, the Swami translated for the SP: "As a person gives up old and worn out garments and accepts new apparel, so does the embodied soul give up old and worn out bodies and accepts new bodies."

The trek resumed. As they came near where the Major's dead body lay, the SP said to the group: "Captain Carruthers and I have decided that we will cremate the Major's body in the same way."

The rest of the petrol was poured over the pile of brush and branches that completely covered the Majors body. It was set afire. The group waited there until they were sure the process was complete, and the fire had been fully extinguished. A small portion of the ash was then collected for administering proper Christian rites at the town church.

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The trek down from the hill was just as relaxed as the trek up was tense. There was no fear now. This was truly now a sanctuary - the forest of no fear. This was now the primal jungle at its most benevolent. People were walking in ones and twos over a wide length of the trail. The Swami at this time was walking alongside Vajraninad. Suddenly he thought of something and asked: "Vajraninad, try to remember carefully if you can. When did Sapnabhairavi inform Maj. Simpson that she was pregnant?"

"I cannot give you the exact day, but I remember it was between Christmas and New Year."

"And tell me, if you also remember, when did the proposal come to you from the Major about moving to Aizawl, and when did Sapnabhairavi die?"

"The proposal came only a couple of weeks before we actually moved at the end of March. Sapnabhairavi died about two months ago."

"So that would be about the middle of July when she died. Thank you, Vajraninad," said the Swami and walked on ahead to where the SP and Inspector Aichhinga were walking side by side. He caught up with them. He asked: "A question for either of you. When did the monster killings start?"

"In January."

"And by July or so, was the monster killing spree in full swing?"

"Yes. By then there had been some eleven killings," said Inspector Aichhinga.

"Were all these eleven victims male?"

"Yes."

"And subsequently, were all the victims young women?"

"Yes."

"What are you thinking, Maharaj?" the SP interjected.

"I'm still obsessed with coincidences. There's probably nothing to this."

"Nonetheless, tell us your theory."

"Well, I am very afraid that even though the monster has been destroyed, the so-called monster-killings have not been solved. This monster did not kill any of the villagers. We are dealing with someone very diabolical. The first eleven victims were killed only to serve as a cover for a murder, or more correctly, a double murder. And the subsequent killings of women were done because the

killer began to enjoy killing, and made this more enjoyable by bringing a sexual dimension to it. The real killer is out roaming free, while we are pinning the blame on the hapless monster."

"I surmised something like this when you stayed back to pray for the monster. How can we prove all this?"

"I think a great deal will be clear when we have seen the autopsy report on the victim of two nights ago, and the answers to the other questions I asked you there."

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The Swami was walking once again alongside Vajraninad. The former asked: "You have been giving your secrets little by little, stage by stage. Are there more? Was there anything more said between you and Sapnabhairavi when you dreamed of the execution?"

"There was, but I am sworn to uphold a secret. I have been for twenty years. I will tell you only this: I told her the secret of the Polashi Kharga, seeing as she was now its sole custodian."

"But she already knows the story of the kharga!"

"I am not speaking of the story, but the secret - the *Samrajjo Lipi*, the Empire Parchment."

The Swami did not know what to say, or if to say anything. After a few minutes, Vajraninad spoke again: "Actually, as I think about it, I should tell you the secret. I am sworn to always have a backup custodian who knows the secret, lest anything should happen to me. I was meaning to make Sapnabhairavi that custodian but did not get around to it. So last night, fearing my own end, I told her the secret. But since Sapnabhairavi is now just an apparition, and since it is not clear where the kharga is, I will request you to be the backup custodian of the knowledge at least, if not the sword."

After the Swami heard the story of the Empire Parchment, he wandered off and walked a great distance behind the party, all by himself. All kinds of emotions were playing on his face. He was somewhere else, in another time. His childhood.

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When the party reached the vehicles, the Jeep they saw on their way up was gone. It would later be found abandoned in the outskirts of the town.

When the Swami saw that the Jeep was gone, he said to the SP: "Andrew, we should probably check if this Lady Wyndmere is all right. And then, is it possible to enquire into her movements on Tuesday night and Wednesday morning? It’s probably nothing, but it is a rather striking coincidence that an acquaintance of Maj. Simpson makes an unusual visit from London and the Major dies during her stay."

"Maharaj, I will put Inspector Aichhinga on it immediately."

21

INSPECTOR AICHHINGA MAKES A MISTAKE

The party had come down from the hill on Thursday around noon. That very afternoon, Inspector Aichhinga, this time in uniform, entered the Government Guest House and talked to the desk clerk. "Is one Lady Wyndmere staying here?"

"Yes, she and her associate Mr. Gurung."

"Do you recall seeing the Lady Tuesday night or Wednesday morning?"

"I am on the day shift. So I could not tell you about Tuesday night. But I did see her early Wednesday morning as she was returning from her morning walk."

"Does she take morning walks regularly?"

"That's the only morning I saw her, returning from the walk."

"Was she carrying anything as she came in?"

"She was carrying her regular shoes, and she was wearing tennis shoes."

"The regular shoes, were they the kind with straps?"

"Yes. She was carrying them by the straps, with her two fingers hooked round the straps."

"I would like to speak to her. Would you call her room please? Tell her that Police Inspector Aichhinga would like to speak to her."

"Sir, I will call Mr. Gurung. We have instructions not to call the Lady directly."

In a few minutes Mr. Gurung came down, and looked at the Inspector enquiringly. The latter said: "I would like to speak to Lady Wyndmere. Police business."

Mr. Gurung took the Inspector to one side, and produced his warrant - a very impressive affair with the imperial crest emblazoned in gold. He said: "I am Maj. Gurung from London, with British Secret Intelligence Service. Her Ladyship is having a rest. Perhaps she can call you as soon as she wakes up?"

The Inspector was quite impressed by the sight of the warrant and the highly polished and polite conduct of the Major. He threw caution to the wind and agreed. He left his telephone number and returned to his office.

About forty-five minutes later as the Inspector was sitting at his desk, his phone rang. The caller said: "Inspector Aichhinga, this is Mr. Gurung. Please hold for Her Excellency Lady Wyndmere."

Then he heard that most cultured, upper class British voice that he so far had heard only on the radio and in the English films: "Good afternoon, Inspector Aichhinga. I am so sorry to have missed you."

"No matter, Madame. I just have a few questions if you do not mind."

"Please ask your questions."

"Madame, I believe that you knew Maj. Simpson."

"I know Maj. Simpson very well."

"And Madame, when did you last see him?"

"Let me think. I think it was Tuesday afternoon when he came by the Guest House. Why, what is the matter, Inspector?"

"Madame, I am very sorry to report that the Major has died. He died Tuesday night or Wednesday morning when he was up on the hills on a mission."

There was a long silence at the other end. Then came the voice again, still very controlled: "Let me take a moment to absorb this. How did the Major die?"

"It seems that he stumbled in the dark and fell backward and hit his head on a rock."

"I see. Is is everything being attended to?"

"Everything is being attended to, Madame. Please do not worry on that account. My sincere condolences."

"Thank you, Inspector Aichhinga. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Madame."

The Inspector now walked over to the SP's office, and peeked in: "A word, Sir?"

"Please come in, Steve. Have a seat."

Inspector Aichhinga now briefed the SP on his entire experience of the afternoon. After listening, the SP said: "Do me a favor, Steve. Rather than me calling Maharaj and relaying this information secondhand, perhaps you can call him at the DC's residence and brief him, in as much detail as you have done just now."

"I will do that immediately, Sir."

When the Inspector left, the SP suddenly had a nameless feeling of unease. Something was not right here. What was it? He could not identify what troubled him about what he just learned. Is it that the

Inspector gave in too easily to the imposing Maj. Gurung and agreed to a telephone interview? What was wrong with a telephone interview? The Inspector did not even get the full name of Lady Wyndmere - the very first thing an interviewer should have done. The interview was not very informative either. The Inspector was too overwhelmed by the interviewee's personality. This was a flawed interview altogether. Anyway, the SP decided not to admonish his bright young protge, this time.

And thus, another crucial link in the investigation did not get not made.

22

THE THIRD AVENGER

After the meeting with the SP and the Swami on Tuesday afternoon, Maj. Simpson got himself half a mug of coffee from the Mess Hall, came to his office and closed the door. He took out a bottle of brandy from his desk drawer and filled the rest of the mug. This is the only thing that seemed to help anymore with his intense chest pain - even if for a little while. The Major looked at the breast area of his khaki uniform. So far the swelling was not apparent through the clothing. He loosened his tie and removed the tiepin. He then undid a few buttons, pulled on his undershirt, and visually examined the ugly tumors all over his chest - translucent marble-like growths that seemed about to burst. He could not get used to the hideousness of this sight. He redid the buttons, and straightened his tie and re-secured it with his Jade Buddha tiepin.

The Buddha image was supposed to help ward off this malady, but instead it was what caused it. He just learned this – or rather, put it together – yesterday. But he continued to wear the Buddha to fulfill his destiny. The Major recalled the chain of events that led to the Buddha coming to his possession. He recalled how he came to identify his first and second avengers: The wielder of the Kihei Katana and the installer of the Jade Buddha. He had in fact met both. But who would be the third, the wielder of the Plassey Kharga?

The Major was used to handling unexpected and sudden developments and he had one on his hands now. Even if Sapnabhairavi and Vajraninad were dead as he had been assured, there could be ample clues up there in the ruins, suggesting foul play. The planned trip to the ruins by the Swami tomorrow morning could uncover a great deal. The Major was not told what had been done with the two bodies. Three, really. Sapnabhairavi may have left something in writing. It was essential for the Major to get to the scene well in advance of the Swami's party. The Major was ready to die, but he had to prevent the truth from coming out. Such were his priorities.

The arrival of Lady Wyndmere presented another problem. "What a fantastic coincidence that she would be the sister of Sapnabhairavi," thought the Major. The Major knew this, but the Lady did not know the he knew. And what a fantastic coincidence that she would be in Aizawl at this juncture! "That is one coincidence too many," thought the Major.

His chest hurt, and he took another gulp from the coffee mug. Then a wry smile broke on his face. He realized that there was now zero chance of a future for him as a British Lord. As a continuation of that thought, the Major took out a folded piece of paper from a buttoned compartment of his wallet, spread it out and looked at it nearly hypnotically. Was the hour he would meet his destiny close?

He remembered the Samurai's invitation to face him like a man. He would. But who would wield the kharga? That person also needed to be up on the hill tonight. The Major had to make sure of that. As he reflected thus, another thought - or rather some words - came to mind. Words seared into his mind, his heart, his brain: “It will be someone you already know.”

When those words were told him, he had not yet known Vajraninad and Sapnabhairavi. So – according to the prophecy – those two could not be the wielders of the Plassey Kharga, even if per chance they were alive and on the hill. For the same reason, the Swami could not be the avenger either. Could it be Havildar Haldar then? But how is that possible? And if not he, then who? Who is the person that needed to be up on hill tonight?

"O my God, the third avenger," said the Major out loud. There is no coincidence here!

23

THE DEVIL CONSIDERS A NIGHT OUT

He lived in a small, two-room cottage in the middle of large trees. The nearest house was half a kilometer away – giving him complete privacy and seclusion. The door of the cottage opened to his bedroom-cum-living room. The other room was the kitchen. The toilet and the bathroom were in a small outhouse. His bed was just a mattress laid on the floor.

That is where he lay this evening, considering if to make this a night out. Anytime he did such considering, he went over his entire life - for that seemed to mentally prepare him like nothing else.

He lived as a young boy with his mother in a village in the Sundarbans. There, early on, the jungle became an integral part of him, of who he was. And he liked that. He loved the jungle. He loved the smell, the feel and the chill of the jungle. There were such deep peace and expansive beauty here as were not to be found anywhere else.

On some weekends they would travel to the Sealdah Station in Calcutta, by boat and train, and then take the bus to the Governor's House. She would show him the magnificent edifice and say: "Son, that is where you belong. Your father is an English nobleman who lived in that house. That is where you were conceived. You were to be an English nobleman. But he abandoned you. So you now live in a puny village in jungle with a servant-class woman. This world has wronged you terribly.

"Son, you must make great evil visit upon this world. I was the Ayah to the Sahebs four-year old son when you were born. The great affluence that child lived in should have been also yours. Even at that age, that boy was ambitious. He said when he grew up he would come back to India as a military officer. Son, you must also become a military officer, get close to him, and take your revenge."

He did not like this line of talk. He felt uneasy. Secretly, he wished he could meet his half-brother someday, like brothers. He fancied the thought that he had someone he could call Dada, like many of his friends did. One day he told his mother that he wanted to forget all that about the Governor's House, and be like all the other normal Bengali boys. He also told her that this village in the jungles of the Sundarbans was a much more interesting place to live in than a place like the Governor's house. This disturbed his mother greatly.

His mother took him to the village Ojha, the exorcist. They sat there until all the Ojha's visitors left. Then the mother told him why they had come. The Ojha was stunned. He said: "I take evil out of people. How can I install evil in people? Why would one want to do that?"

The mother then pleaded long with the Ojha. At length he said: "I can refer you to somebody. He is a retired Thug who now lives deep in these jungles and worships Chhin'nomosta. When he was a dacoit, a highwayman, it is said he had killed one hundred and eight people. He is very old now, may be nearly ninety years. If anybody knows about the essence of evil, he does. But before you go there, let me warn you. That temple is right in the heart of the tiger-infested area of the Sundarbans. Go early, and return when it is still broad daylight."

After the visitors left, it occurred to the Ojha that he never gave the mother the directions to the Temple of Chhin'nomosta, and she never asked.

The next day was Sunday. They started early, and came as close to the Thugs hideout by a hired boat as they could, and asked the boatman to wait. They then walked through well marked trails and eventually arrived at the Temple of Chhin'nomosta, a thatched hut really. The man was seated at the front porch on a raised plank of wood called a piri. There was nobody else in sight, but from inside the hut the boy thought he heard sounds and growls of a large animal pacing. Through the open door, they could see the fearsome image of Chhin'nomosta – the goddess who had just beheaded herself and was holding her own head in one hand and the sword in the other. Three streams of blood were issuing from the severed neck. The streams shot upward and then curved back down to the mouths of two women eagerly drinking, and to the mouth of the Goddess herself.

The Thug himself was even more grotesque, with matted hair and beard, red eyes and sharp-pointed red teeth. His dark complexion was really a very fair complexion that was sun-burnt. His eyes were uncharacteristically light, with a tinge of blue. His face was broad and very square. He was now sitting with a chilam held tightly between his two palms. Clearly, he had been smoking hashish for sometime now, for he was swaying back and forth in a deep stupor. When he saw the visitors, he started to shoo them away. When the mother said the Ojha had sent them, he was mollified, and asked them to sit on the ground in front of him.

The mother then related the entire story, and told him what she wanted. She concluded: "Look at how strong and well-built the boy is. But at heart he is much too soft. He reads poetry and paints. He feeds wild birds, and rescues wounded animals. If I give him lunch money, he gives it to the beggars. He cannot even squash a mosquito that is sucking his blood. He needs to be toughened up so that he can become a great evildoer."

The Thug took a puff and asked: "Did the Saheb force himself on you? Speak the truth, woman!"

"Actually, no. I liked him, and I seduced him."

"Did he leave any money to raise the boy?"

"Yes, he left a great deal of money to raise the boy well."

"Then there is no cause for taking revenge. You are not a wronged party. Leave the boy alone."

The mother would not give up. She said in a commanding voice: "Never mind all that. As I just told you, I have a great deal of money. More money than you can imagine. Do what I want."

The Thug sat silently, considering his chilam. He looked at the woman intently. He took a few puffs. He looked at the woman again. Then he said: "All right. Leave the boy with me. Come back after one month, and bring ten thousand rupees."

The mother readily agreed, and left the weeping boy behind. The Thug got up and walked unsteadily some distance alongside the mother. As he stood up, it became clear how this shriveled and wizened person was once a fearsome highwayman. He was very tall, with broad shoulders. When the two were out of the boy's earshot, the Thug said: "Woman, you are pretending you are here for the first time. But I remember you. You were here some fifteen years ago to receive instructions on my Jungle Sutra of Desire. Is that what you practiced on the Saheb?"

The woman did not respond.

After the training was over, the mother continued her exhortations on a daily basis – this time to an attentive and appreciative listener: "Son, you must join the military. When your half-brother arrives in India, you must get close to him. But do not harm him physically. Torture him and torment him, slowly slowly. Make him suffer great pain and great anguish, play with him the way an angler plays with a fish that has just taken the bait. Son, use that poet's imagination that you have been so blessed with..."

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Killing spree was nothing to him. At first the killings in Aizawl were the part of a plan that had nothing to do with the victims. They were just necessary for the plan to work. But soon that plan was behind him, but the killings were central to his love of life, or perhaps the lust of life. There was no stopping now.

Now the man felt that he was inclined to go out this night. He should set out as soon as it is dark enough to do so. It is not easy to find a young tribal woman alone after dark anymore. Young tribal women are what he looked for. What he really looked for was that wild, intoxicating, mind-bending jungle smell of a woman he once knew – under the three arching blood streams of Chhin'nomosta. Time after time he kept hoping to smell that smell – time after time he was disappointed. His hopes rose, his heart throbbed faster, his blood boiled in anticipation – and then, nothing. This put him into a murderous rage, each time.

He would now rise, bathe and cover his naked body with a handmade Naga robe. Inside the long robe he had made a long pocket in which to hide the kukri. He would rub a great deal of emollient on his chest so that the pain from the tumors would be under control, for a while at least. He would gather the bottom portion of the robe up to his knees and get on his bicycle. When he would spot his quarry, he would remove the robe to be fully naked, take the kukri in his hand, and face her.

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Just as the man had finished that thought and was about to rise, he heard stealthy footsteps on dry leaves. Suddenly, great fear overcame him - fear such as he never knew. He lay supine, not finding the energy to move. The flimsy door was kicked open, and he saw a person he immediately recognized. But he thought this was more Kali herself, with the kharga raised. He recognized the Polashi Kharga, distinctive for the ivory carving. The woman advanced, and held the kharga horizontally in two hands for him to view. Then, with almost military precision of movement of her

wrists, she turned it so he could view the other side. She came closer, and rested one foot on his chest. Under the pressure of the foot on the tumors his chest hurt intensely. But only for an instant. The kharga moved like lightning. The look of surprise continued to remain on the man's face, and his lips moved – as if the head was trying to say something.

The woman took a fresh champa out of her garment, and inserted it in his open mouth. As she started to leave, she suddenly remembered something and came back. The kharga arced out again, making the deep diagonal cut.

24

THE DEBRIEFING

Early Friday morning four men sat in the office of Col. Aurora: The Colonel himself, the DC, the SP and Capt. Carruthers. The door was closed and locked from inside. The Colonel opened the meeting. "We are here to discuss the manner in which Maj. Simpson died, and the official report on that. As you can guess, this report will go to London and receive close scrutiny. It will then become news worldwide. I am not overly concerned about the political side, but I want to make sure that we put together a solid report. Perhaps the SP will be kind enough to give us a briefing."

The SP replied: "As you know, Capt. Carruthers and I are the only people who saw the Major's body on Wednesday morning. Although Scout Lalzama discovered the body, he only saw two booted feet. We had covered up the body on Wednesday, and it was cremated in place on Thursday. The Captain and I examined the scene carefully, and we have agreed on a description. I have produced a draft report for your review. Perhaps we can take a few minutes to read this - and then we will be in a better position to discuss further."

The SP produced the typed original and three carbon copies of the report he had drafted. Everyone started to read.

REPORT ON THE DEATH OF
MAJOR HARRY SCOTT SIMPSON, INDIAN ARMY

On Tuesday, September the 10th, 1946, Major Simpson attended a meeting at the Assam Rifles Base in which the recent murders of many villagers by a crazed killer that roamed a hill outside Aizawl were discussed. He also heard about an investigative party that was to go up to the hill the following morning. That same evening, the Major took a Jeep, and without telling anyone where he was going, left the Base. The following morning, the joint police-military party found the Jeep parked at a streambed which was the trailhead for the hill. While no one can know what was on the Major's mind, it was naturally assumed that he decided to hunt down the killer himself – ahead of the party. It may be recalled that the Major received multiple decorations for acts of bravery.

After about an hour and a half's hike up the hill, the scout for the party spotted two booted feet under the brushes, next to the trail. He reported this to Superintendent Zoramthanga of the Lushai Hills police. The SP asked the entire party to stay behind. He and Capt. Carruthers of the Assam Rifles then proceeded to examine the sighting.

The scene revealed the body of a military officer – a white male – whose body was however in an unsightly condition due to intense animal activity the previous night. His face was intact. He was identified by Capt. Carruthers as Maj. Harry

Scott Simpson - with whom the Captain has worked for nearly three years. The SP also knew the Major by sight, and confirmed the identification. The Major's official warrant and revolver were retrieved. The weapon was in its holster, and had not been fired.

A close examination showed that the Major had suffered a severe wound at the back of his head. The grounds where the Major lay were craggy and strewn with boulders. The wound is consistent with the Majors stumbling and falling backward, hitting his head on a boulder. There were blood marks on one boulder nearby, but the Majors head was not near it. The Major may have tried to move after he was wounded, before succumbing to the injury. No signs were found to indicate the presence of any other humans on the scene – although there was plenty of evidence of small animals and birds having been there.

Because of the condition of the Major's body, the SP and the Captain decided jointly to cremate the remains in place, and bring a portion of the ashes down to the town for administration of proper Christian rites and military honors.

Signed:

A. Zoramthanga, IPS
Superintendent of Police
Lushai Hills District

J. E. Carruthers, Captain, Indian Army
Deputed to Assam Rifles Aizawl

When everyone finished reading, the Colonel spoke. "This is an informative and concise report – the kind I like. But does it not raise questions? For example, what happened to the Major's signature Jade Buddha tiepin?"

"A bird might have flown away with it, as birds tend to do with shiny trinkets," said the SP.

"Fine. And what if someone suggests that the body was cremated in an awful hurry?"

The Captain answered: "Sir, I do not think anyone – any British brass at any rate – would want to open the door to a detailed description of the Major's body. They certainly would want to keep the British Press from going anywhere near that topic."

"All right then. Everything seems to be in order. If the DC will countersign this report, then I will endorse it and forward it to the Inspector General in Shillong. The IG will send it to GHQ India," Col. Aurora looked at the DC questioningly.

The DC nodded his agreement. He did not say a single word throughout the meeting. The Colonel spoke again: "This meeting is adjourned. Superintendent, have your draft made final and send me two copies please."

As his visitors were leaving, the Colonel called out after them and said: "By the way, Superintendent, Captain, a very interesting report indeed!," and he winked. He then looked at Capt. Carruthers and said: "Captain, could you stay back a moment. I need to speak to you on another matter. Please close the door."

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About a month later, all the participants in the debriefing meeting were to receive the same telegram, with a copy to IG, Shillong:

FROM FIELD MARSHALL SIR CLYDE OAKENLAKE CINC GHQ INDIA

THIS IS TO THANK EACH ONE OF YOU INDIVIDUALLY FOR YOUR HIGHLY PROFESSIONAL HANDLING OF THE RECENT EVENTS IN AIZAWL THAT LED TO THE SAD DEATH OF ONE OF OUR FINEST MAJOR HARRY SCOTT SIMPSON STOP THE HONORABLE PRIME MINISTER ALSO JOINS ME IN THIS COMMENDATION STOP WELL DONE MEN END

25

MILITARY POLICE LEARN NEW FACTS

As soon as the Captain closed the door and turned to face Col. Aurora, he saw that the mischievous twinkle had gone. Instead he was looking at a grim, hard face. "What is it, Sir?" he asked.

"I pulled out Maj. Simpson's local personnel file to record his death. This file has copies of his early military record. Please have a look at this item which I must have read earlier. It must have slipped my mind."

The Colonel handed the Captain a sheet of paper with the heading and the crest of The Royal Military College. It contained a summary evaluation of Maj. Simpson:

Mr. Harry Scott Simpson has demonstrated to us his potential of being a fine military officer. He will do very well in all assignments other than field combat. He unfortunately displays a behaviour that suggests that he will be unable to kill in combat. He most likely will freeze in such a situation and get himself and others killed. His fellow cadets have reported that he is unable to even shoot a wild duck in a hunting setting.

The two officers looked at each other incredulously. When the Captain was able to speak again, he said: "Sir, we both best get over to the Major's living quarters and see if kept anything like a diary – or a death note."

In the Major's quarters, they found – right there in his top desk drawer – a sealed envelope addressed to Capt. James E. Carruthers – personal and confidential. On top of the same desk, there was a picture of the Major standing between his parents – with the Tower Bridge in the background. Captain Carruthers picked up the framed picture and looked at it in amazement. Then he said to Col. Aurora: "The Major's father was Governor of Bengal. Sir, do you notice anything unusual about him?"

"Pronounced square jaws."

"Do they remind you of anyone?"

"Havildar Haldar."

Captain Carruthers sat on the Major's bed and read the letter. The Colonel meanwhile examined the rest of the room. Nothing stood out as unusual. The Major did not keep a photograph of his fiance in his lodgings – which the Colonel found a little surprising. Perhaps he did not want to expose a highborn lady to the comments her picture might attract in the all-male military barracks. When the Colonel finished, he also sat down on the bed next to the Captain. The Captain now finished reading, and seemed to consider something for a few moments. The he turned to the Colonel. "This is intended to be a personal letter for my eyes only. But I will breach that trust and ask you to read it please. I need your help in dealing with someone."

"If I read this letter, will I be obligated to do something that I would rather not do?"

"No."

"Then I will read it."

The Colonel read the letter through. The two men looked at each other questioningly. The Colonel took the lead. "We have been prevented once from looking into these matters. And as long as we are unable to use this letter in evidence, we have got nothing against this villain. So what are our options?"

"May be we can somehow send the civilian police after him, by dropping some broad hints. By finger signs, may be."

Before the Colonel had time to react to that last comment, the telephone on the Major's desk rang. It was Col. Aurora's personal assistant. After speaking to him, the Colonel turned to the Captain and said: "The SP had called to find out if the very same person we were just talking about was at the Base. But he did not come to work today or yesterday and nobody knows why. So the SP and his men are headed to his living quarters, the address of which they got from my assistant. They asked that we join them there."

The two men were off, brimming with curiosity and apprehension. As they were getting into their vehicle, the Colonel said: "Oh, there was something else. Wednesday morning someone called and identified himself as Inspector Aichhinga. He got from us the address of our villain's residence. But we just learned that the real Inspector Aichhinga never made such a call. He was still on the hill at that time. And in another development, when you were up on the hill, the police wanted a full record of Maj. Simpson's movements for the past one year. I think they put it all together. Pretty sharp fellows, the police?!"

A while later Capt. Carruthers asked: "Sir, what do you think of Maj. Simpson - now, I mean?"

"It seems to me that he was a reluctant monster. Like our real monster on the hill, perhaps?"

26

CIVILIAN POLICE SOLVE THE CASE

They had come to the Debriefing meeting Friday morning in the DC's vehicle. The SP's vehicle was left at the DC's residence. They both returned to the residence, and the DC and his wife left for the mosque. Vajraninad asked if he too could come and see the mosque, and was cordially invited to join. The SP stayed at the residence to speak to the Swami. Koeli Khan asked her maid to serve them tea, coffee and refreshment.

The SP said: "Maharaj, I got the medical examination report that you asked for after returning from the hill. The young woman, the latest victim, had seven ribs cracked from pressure applied to the chest. There was secretion inside her. By microscopic examination, the doctor concluded that, to a reasonable degree of certainty, this was from a healthy young male.

"Although the head was severed cleanly, the cut did not correspond to one fell swoop of a long sword. Instead, it seemed to have been done with something like a machete or kukri, with slight hesitation marks and marks of lateral movement of the blade.

"As to your other request, my staff obtained the records of Maj. Simpson's movements from Col. Aurora's office and compared it against the dates of the monster killings. During eight of the eleven killings in the first wave - the male killings, that is - the Major was in Sylhet. During the second wave of killings – the female killings – the Major was in Sylhet for the first two."

Even as the Swami was hearing the report from the SP and taking in the facts, his mind had wandered. He was already trying to put these new facts – which are what he had hoped and expected to hear - into some kind of context. He replied: "Andrew, our entire case of the Aizawl killings now boils down to a single question: Who is the rib-cracker whom we had encountered in that Top Secret file, and whom we encounter again here? The Samurai said it was an Englishman. But if it was not Maj. Simpson, who was it?"

The SP replied: "Maharaj, as you recall, I had not read that report myself. But from what you described to me, it seems that the Samurai saw the rib-cracker – as you now call him – first from the back, and a while later from the front. Is that correct?"

"Yes, Andrew, that is absolutely correct. So the Samurai may have seen two different military men that look alike from the back."

"Maharaj, you may have just found our killer. Let me call my office for backup. We will go pick him up now. Let me also call the Colonel to join us. In fact, I have to inform him officially."

The SP picked up the phone, but then hesitated a moment. He looked at the Swami with a mixture of curiosity and admiration and asked: "Thorndyke?"

"And Jarvis."

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The SP and the Swami arrived at the cottage and waited on the mud road – some distance short of the cottage – for help to arrive. Within minutes, Inspector Aichhinga arrived with two armed constables. Both vehicles then drove up to the cottage. But something seemed not right. The door of the cottage was open. A bicycle that was probably propped up next to the door lay flat on the ground. Nobody came out to look at two police vehicles noisily pulling up to the front.

The SP asked the Swami to wait in the vehicle. He and Inspector Aichhinga drew their revolvers and cocked them. They approached the door. The two constables – their rifles at the ready – made for the two sides and the back of the house. The Swami saw the two officers peeking inside the door, and then the Inspector retching violently and sitting down on the stoop. The SP went in, and came out after a few minutes. He called the constables and asked them to stand guard at the door, but not look inside. As he approached the Swami, he saw the military police arrive. He waited until Col. Aurora and Capt. Carruthers dismounted and joined them. He said: "Havildar Haldar is dead."

He then said to the Swami: "Maharaj, please excuse us a moment. We need to discuss jurisdiction."

The three officers went some distance away and conferred among themselves. The Swami saw that the military officers chose not to look at the body. He wondered if there were animal activities again. But he did not ask the SP who did not volunteer any further information.

27

A DINNER PARTY AT THE KHANS

Koeli Khan was insistent that the two monks spend several more days in her home as guests – this time playing free-spirited tourists. But the Swami longed to go back to his mother. In the end, it was settled that they would leave Monday morning.

On Thursday evening, the day they returned from the hill, the Swami took a walk on the fragrant grounds of the DC's bungalow with Vajraninad. He told his friend in a firm but sympathetic voice: "Vajraninad, I do not want to hear any arguments. You will come with me to Silchar and stay with my mother and me until you have recovered your health. Then I will help you set up an ashram in or around Silchar. You know my family is wealthy. This is something I can and want to do."

Vajraninad was too overwhelmed by this enormous gesture of friendship to reply. Then he started weeping. He said: "Meghaswami, I can never forget those eyes. I will never forget those eyes. I have lost all interest in living."

That caused the Swami to go into his own private agony. Eyes were something on his mind also. Sad supplicant eyes.

On Saturday evening there was a dinner party at the DC's house. In addition to the two houseguests, there were invited Superintendent and Mrs. Zoramthanga, as well as the bachelor Capt. Carruthers and Col. Aurora whose wife was in Chandigarh. When the Zoramthangas arrived in early evening, the Swami met Ione Zoramthanga for the very first time. After they were introduced, the first thing Ione said was: "Maharaj, I have heard so much about you. But the first thing I want to say to you is: Give up smoking!"

"With that kind of admonition, I think I will, Madame! I believe I will."

As he said that, he was wondering: How is it that all the women associated with this business are stunningly beautiful? First, Sapnabhairavi, then Koeli Khan, and now Ione Zoramthanga!

The Swami checked himself in mid-thought. I monk should not be entertaining such thoughts.

After drinks and appetizers were served, Ione joined Koeli in the kitchen where the latter was supervising the food preparation. Vajraninad offered to slice tomatoes and cucumbers, saying that he was an expert at slicing fruits - what with preparing all these offerings to Kali all these days. His offer was graciously accepted. Now the DC said to the SP and the Swami: "This may be a good opportunity for us to have a wrap-up discussion, off-the-record - so to speak. Let us go into my study."

The three men entered the secluded study, drinks in hand - whiskey-and-soda for the DC and the SP, Orange Squash for the Swami. The DC closed the door behind him. The three men sat down, or sank, on the soft sofas.

28

A CLOSED-DOOR MEETING

Before the DC or the SP could open the floor, the Swami spoke: "I am glad to have this opportunity to say something in strict privacy. I take it that the official investigation is over, and that no arrests are pending?"

"No arrests are pending," said the SP.

"Then I am most grateful to you for sparing a much aggrieved man who acted in self-defense. Surely you have deduced that the head wound the Major died of was not accidental, and surely you deduced who was responsible."

The SP looked at the DC who nodded. Then the SP said: "The Major did not die of head wound."

For a few seconds there was pin drop silence. Then the Swami said: "Well..."

"Maharaj, the Major did not die of his head wound and there was no animal activity. He was very formally executed by two swordsmen. Our examination of the scene showed that he was standing up for the execution – and so he was very much alive after he received the head injury. One executioner stood in front of him and cut his body in half with diagonal stroke, starting from the Major's left shoulder, ending near his right waist. The other executioner stood behind him and took his head off. We found the Major's body in three pieces.

"When we first saw this sight, Capt. Carruthers and I both vomited. Then we collected ourselves, and had a quick conference. We decided that no good could come from telling this story. It was also too fantastic and too incredible. So we decided on the head injury as the cause of death. We assembled the body as well as we could, and covered it up completely with brush and wild banana leaves, weighed down with rocks. As things stand now, only the three of us and Capt. Carruthers know the truth. Not even Col. Aurora knows, although he is too smart a man to not suspect something."

The Swami thought for a moment and then asked: "And you have now chosen to take me, someone who has no official capacity, into your confidence why?"

"One sword strike was made Samurai style, and it is obvious who that executioner was. He is dead, and that puts an end to that. But we think you may some idea as to who the other executioner was."

"Since the Samurai strike would have killed the Major anyway, why does the second executioner matter?"

At this point the DC responded: "Siddhartha, I will come clean with you on how I came to choose to bring you to our aid. You have always suspected that there was something more behind my choice – something I was not telling you. There was."

The DC then related the story of meeting the woman in his garden. He ended with the account of her giving him a fresh champa.

"Please describe her," said the Swami.

Then the DC gave a detailed description, including the woven flower basket or the saji. He also mentioned his observation of the unusual eyes that seemed to hold some deep mystery. He then said that he had made some quiet inquiries about the woman in the village. There was no such person there. No women in that village was known to wear a sari.

The Swami asked: "You say this particular mystery about the eyes could not be missed?"

"That's right. I cannot describe it well, but it is there for anyone to see. In fact, it could be used as a visible distinguishing feature."

The Swami looked most puzzled.

The SP again took up the thread. "So it seems as though the person the DC saw was Sapnabhairavi. She was imploring the DC to bring you because you are the only person that could and would nurse her man back to health and sanity. But this was long after she died and was cremated. That being the case, could the second executioner have been ... have been the dead Sapnabharavi?"

The last two words somehow hung in mid air, and three stared at those invisible, suspended words. The Swami recovered, and considered what he now could and should say. He then decided to say the following: "As long as we are entertaining fantastic stories for the moment, I will answer your question in that vein. It *was* Sapnabhairavi. Vajraninad saw the execution. He thought he was having a nightmare or a dream. But it was all too real. It was exactly as you have just described. Also, I know where the Jade Buddha tiepin ended up."

"Where?"

"I saw it stuck to the monster's sash, near where the Netsuke-and-Inro were hanging. We had heard that the Jade Buddha fitted snugly into the ivory box. But now, attached to the tie clasp, it no longer fitted. So he somehow secured it to the sash."

Both the officers sat up as if they had received a jolt of electricity. The DC asked the Swami sharply: "You did not touch that Buddha, did you?"

"No. It was consigned to the fire that burned the monster. Why do you ask?"

The officers exchanged glances. The DC nodded again. The SP spoke. "When we found the body of the Major, we could see that there was something the matter with his chest area. We then removed his shirt and undershirt, and found that over a circular area centered on where he wore the tiepin, there was a host of tiny tumors the size of and the appearance of marbles. There was also a rectangular shadow on the chest corresponding roughly to the metallic clasp. Our guess is that the Jade Buddha

from Nagasaki – because of what it is made of or because of what is inside it – is radioactive. The tumors looked so virulent that the Major would certainly have died of this affliction very soon."

"It almost sounds as though somebody – Providence or some other agency – had layers of plan for the Major's end," commented the Swami.

"There's more."

"Oh?"

The SP took out a piece of folded paper from his pocket and spread it out on the coffee table. The paper was a letterhead of the Bengal Command in Fort William. On it was drawn the outline of a human body, frontal view, in pencil. On top of this were two straight lines drawn in red pencil – one diagonal line across the torso, and one horizontal line through the neck. On the chest, astride the diagonal line, were scattered several red dots. The SP said: "We found this in the Major's wallet. It has been a considerable time since he was based in Fort William. So it would seem that for a long time the Major has known what his fate was going to be, exactly and completely.

"And from all we have learned from the Major's movements, it is as though, at some level, he was willingly approaching his fate - like a moth to a fire. He could have called an end to his tour of duty and returned to England any time, at his will. There he would be completely safe. But he chose to come to Sylhet and tracked down Guru Vajraninad. He then clung to him and his consort. He then sent them to Aizawl and followed them to Aizawl and stayed in Aizawl precisely at a time when he knew that the Samurai had came back to hunt him down. It is almost as though the convergence of fate on the hilltop was desired by the Major himself - as if he were the convener of his own execution squad. What is that about, Maharaj?

"And another thing. Although you did not tell us this about your friend, we found out that the priest who died in the Kali Temple was Guru Vajraninad's brother. He was called Vajravahan - meaning the Rider of Thunder. Several of his ribs were cracked, and he was shot in the head with a military caliber revolver."

The Swami now asked: "Was there anything else of significance that you found out about the Kali Temple incident?"

"Well, our information is based on an off-the-record interview with Havildar Haldar that Col. Aurora and Capt. Carruthers conducted. He spoke freely only after receiving assurances that no harm would come to him. The two officers interviewed Haldar on their private initiative after the interview with the Samurai. There was no combat at the Kali Temple, but unarmed people were brutally murdered on Maj. Simpson's order. The priest was sadistically murdered by Maj. Simpson himself. It turns out that a woman also died in that raid. She had twin daughters – identical twins. One daughter called Champa got lost in childhood, and the other, Shampa, lived with the woman at the temple. However, this daughter was not at the temple on the night of the raid, and thus escaped being killed."

"Obviously, the Havildar replaced himself with Maj. Simpson in this account as well. Do we know anything more about these daughters?"

"Only that the one who lived in the temple was exceptionally beautiful. She was called Shampa. She and her sister lost their father in a military operation one night when they were a few years old. The father was reportedly a terrorist. That's the night the other child fled the military, and was never found again."

"I see."

"Well, Maharaj, the feeling that the DC and I both have is that we are being left with a situation that forces us to conclude that things went on that were not due to human agency. Are Guru Vajraninad and you not telling us something? Maharaj, that day when we were trekking up the hill, I saw you look at the jungle as if you had seen someone."

"Of that I am not sure, Andrew. But let us examine this logically. Let us say that Sapnabhairavi - who *was* incredibly beautiful - was one of the twin sisters. She is dead. What about the other sister? Could the DC in his garden and Vajraninad at the execution have seen her?"

"Well, if such a person had arrived in Aizawl, we would have known about her. She would have stayed here several days. There are only two hotels in Aizawl, and I have already had enquiries made there. Nothing turned up."

"How did Havildar Haldar die?"

"He died in exactly the same way as Maj. Simpson. We agreed that the military police will take this matter. And they have decided that it was a killing by the monster. There is sufficient leeway in the time of death to allow for the monster to have killed him Wednesday night, and then gone up to the Quonset hut and be killed himself."

"And who do you think killed the Havildar?"

"This question brings us back to the same subject: Where is the sister?"

"The Haldar murder case is closed, you say?" asked the Swami.

"Yes."

"So what we are speaking of now is all academic. Even if we were to find the killer, that person would not be arrested and tried?"

"That is correct."

"Why pursue this matter then?"

The SP replied. "Maharaj, the DC is a Moslem. I am a Christian. And yet we are being left with hard facts in evidence that compel us to accept that some kind of superhuman revenge-taking by a Hindu goddess went on here. This is a crisis of faith, for me at least. Yet it seems that we are missing something – something that is right in front of our eyes – something that will make all the mystery go away. Maharaj, do you think we are dealing with a superhuman agency?"

The Swami was formulating a response when there was a knock on the door, announcing the arrival of Col. Aurora and Capt. Carruthers. The Swami left the question unanswered, hanging in the air – and he thought – possibly hanging over the entire lives of two fine officers. "They did not deserve this," he thought. As they came back into the living room, they caught a part of a conversation, with Capt. Carruthers telling Koeli Khan, "...the spicier, the better".

The dinner was delicious and the dessert was appropriately sinful. The guests were now seated in the living room, and coffee was being served. Koeli Khan was going round with an opened tin of Black Magic chocolates brought by Capt. Carruthers. No one refused.

The SP managed to sit next to the Swami. He now started a side conversation in a low voice. He said: "Maharaj, *you* brought up the point about Lady Wyndmere and *you* dropped it. But now it has started to trouble me. Not only was there the issue of the coincidence – the Major dying just as she was visiting Aizawl. But now there is also the issue – or the possible issue – of the shoes. Spare shoes, strapped kind, left in the Jeep at night. Spare shoes, strapped kind, carried by Lady Wyndmere as she entered the Guest House the following morning."

"Andrew, I have thought about that many times. But on the other hand, why would a British noble lady come all the way to Aizawl to engage in some foul play? And accompanied by an official Secret Service bodyguard at that. She surely cannot have had any connections to the raids on the Kali Temple or the raid on the Japanese in the Quonset hut. Nor would she have had any knowledge of those incidents. So it would have to be something completely unrelated, like some palace intrigue or love triangle in England. But if so, why this manner of killing? Considering all these things, I dropped the matter. We may be dealing with unrelated matters appearing to be important clues. May be the Major and the Lady had intended for the Jeep ride and a night-walk in the jungle to be an amorous tryst."

"You may be right. But she seems to be too much of a mystery woman..."

"What did you just say?!"

"A mystery woman."

"Andrew, I did not tell you about Urvashi Rahman!"

"Who is Urvashi Rahman?"

"Let us excuse ourselves and take a walk in the charming gardens in moonlight."

After the Swami finished his story, the SP said: "So we now have two mystery women, and we are farther from any rational understanding. As I said, if this Urvashi Rahman had stayed in a hotel in Aizawl, we would have known. And if she were staying with friends or relatives in a private home, would her movements not arouse suspicion of the hosts?"

29

THE LEAVE-TAKING

It was now time for the sad, but necessary, leave-taking. The vehicle, driven by a constable, had arrived on time on Monday morning. The Swami and Vajraninad had finished breakfast, and Koeli Khan had packed the lunch for the road. The luggage – whatever little there was – had been loaded on to the vehicle. The SP, the Captain and the Colonel had arrived to say goodbye. Both the Swami and Vajraninad felt overwhelmed by all this outpouring of genuine gratitude. But they were in for a surprise when they stepped outside the house.

Nearly a hundred villagers – men, women and children – had come to say goodbye. A few children came forward holding a basket. In it were two most exquisitely handcrafted robes made by the local artisans. The robes had been, quite thoughtfully, colored saffron. They had beautiful orchid patterns on the front and around the sleeves. There were two hand-woven blankets. There was a case of several bottles of fine wild honey.

The Swami and Vajraninad accepted the gifts with deeply bowed heads, and tearfully thanked the villagers. Then they saw the villagers discussing something among themselves, and looking at the two of them. An elder now came forward and asked most hesitatingly if the Swami would say a Hindu prayer for their village. He said that the village had gone through such trauma from the Hindu monster that some healing was needed. The Swami immediately looked at Vajraninad and said: "This honor is yours."

Vajraninad asked for a pitcher of water and a sheaf of mango leaves from the garden to be brought. This was done immediately. Vajraninad then kept dipping the leaves in the water and then sprinkling the water at the villagers by shaking the leaves. The villagers stood round, and he kept moving among them and sprinkling them. All this time he kept chanting over and over again a Sanskrit Shanti Mantra – the Reading of Peace – in his deep, resonant voice that seemed to reverberate over the treetops and across the sky:

Om
Om Dyauh shaantih Antariksham shaantih
Prithivee shaantih Aapah shaantih Oshadhayah shaantih
Vanaspatayah shaantih Vishvedevaah shaantih Brahma shaantih Sarvam shaantih
Shaantireva shaantih Saamaa shaantiredhih
Om shaantih, shaantih, shaantih!

When he stopped, all was quiet. Everyone seemed to be silently absorbing the lingering magic of the moment. When conversation resumed again, the SP said to Vajraninad: "Please translate."

Vajraninad said: "This is the Reading of Peace. It has been translated by Swami Abhedananda thus: 'May peace radiate there in the whole sky as well as in the vast ethereal space everywhere. May peace reign all over this earth, in water and in all herbs, trees and creepers. May peace flow over the whole

universe. May peace be in the Supreme Being Brahman. And may there always exist in all peace and peace alone. Om peace, peace and peace to us and all beings!'"

They were burning daylight, and the trip had to begin. Another round of goodbyes was said. The Swami whispered to the SP: "Kindly tell your wife that I have given up smoking as a sign of respect for the concern shown to me by a most elegant lady."

The SP replied with a wholehearted smile: "I will, Maharaj, I will."

"And do not forget our bargain: If I gave up smoking, you and your wife would come and spend the New Year's holidays with us in Silchar."

"We will be there, Maharaj."

The DC and the SP were the only two men standing close to the vehicle as it was pulling out. The Swami said in a low voice: "Shamsul, Andrew, it is best not to puzzle over things we cannot rationalize. As soon as you can, go to your respective places of worship, and say a prayer. Then you will regain that peace in you which has been so badly disturbed. I am so sorry."

The officers stood there and stared until the vehicle became a small dot and then vanished from the eye.

The roadtrip continued uneventfully, with several rest stops. The Swami and Vajraninad were both absorbed in their own thoughts. The Swami was turning over in his mind the discussion in that closed-door session with the DC and the SP. He was sure that Vajraninad told him the truth and the whole truth. But did there arrive a person on the hill that Vajraninad did not know of? The Swami felt very bad about leaving the two fine officers with their religious faith shaken.

He now looked at his dear friend Vajraninad. Those bright spiritual eyes of the old days were gone. Instead, they were dim eyes of memory - sad, sad memory. And the Swami now remembered another set of eyes – eyes that had made him feel so completely disconcerted and sapped. The prayerful eyes of the monster asking for forgiveness just before he got his head blown to pieces. How was the Swami to redeem himself? How was he to move past this experience, how was he to escape these eyes that fixed him in a questioning gaze? He too was badly injured from this experience.

And, beyond all these, he was injured at the very core of his being. He wondered if his mother knew. He wondered if, when Vajraninad came to his home, he would make the connection.

The Swami extricated himself from these thoughts and concentrated on his friend again.

Vajraninand had never wanted to know about Sapnabhairavi's past before the two met. And she never told him. So he was a man blissfully unaware of all that went on with all these players on all these world stages. Was this profoundly spiritual man really a simpleton in ordinary life? Or was he more intelligent than most of us? As the Swami was considering these questions, he found himself asking: "Vajraninad, did you ever meet the two women who lived in the Kali Temple in Bengal?"

"No. I went there only once after they came to live in the temple. But on that occasion they were visiting some relatives in Calcutta. So I never had the chance."

"Were you never curious as to who they were and what became of them?"

"Meghaswami, intelligent people want to probe every unknown place, recess or room in this world. I, on the other hand, tell myself sometimes: Let the mystery be." He added with a smile: "Does this answer the question you were pondering about me a while ago about my mental capacity?"

The Swami was startled. And he felt small. He could manage only these words: "Forgive me, it was not a worthy thought."

The dialogue was thankfully interrupted as they saw an impressive-looking executive Jeep with a flag flying – with tinted windows – pass them. Now their driver said: "Sir, that would be Lady Wyndmere returning to Silchar."

"I hear that she is connected to the royal family."

"That's true, Sir. Rather unusual, is it not?"

"What is unusual?!"

"That a sari-clad Bengali woman would be called Lady Wyndmere. Actually, her full name is Lady Champa Wyndmere. Beautiful, is it not?"

The Swami was almost visibly shaken. He asked: "You have seen her?"

"Yes, Sir. I just happened to catch a glimpse of her once, going in an open Jeep with a military officer from the Base. She is an incredibly beautiful woman."

"Do you know if the DC or the SP would have had any occasion to see her?"

"I should not think so, Sir. Unless they saw her by chance as I did, there would be no occasion."

Suddenly the whole case became clear to the Swami: Identical twin sisters, one lost in childhood, incredibly beautiful women, Maj. Simpson, his royal fiance, the woman in Shamsul's garden, in Vajraninad's dream, Urvashi Rahman ... everything fits. It was all human agency all along. He silently repeated to himself the words of the SP: “We are missing something – something very simple that is right in front of our eyes – something that will make all the mystery go away.”

It now occurred to the Swami that he violated the very basic rules of investigation. Time and time again, Lady Wyndmere's name cropped up. It was as though someone was cluing him in. Yet he dismissed these clues in favor of a preconceived notion that someone named Lady Wyndmere from England was an Englishwoman. No point blaming Inspector Aichhinga. The Swami was just as much at fault. So much for an amateur playing detective!

Another thought gave the Swami the chills. He had sat face to face and observed those dainty hands gracefully hold a teacup and a saucer. Days later, those very hands lopped two heads off.

The Swami now resolved to write a long letter to the SP as soon as he reached home. He would then send it back with the Constable so that SP would receive it tomorrow evening. All would be clear for him as well, and of course for the DC. He started composing that letter in his mind. But he thought was interrupted when the Constable spoke again: "Rum business, Sir! About the Hindu monster I mean."

"Yes, Constable. That's a very good way of summing it up. Rum business."

The Swami went back to his mental composition. But that now put him right back into his original quandary. Is everything really explained away as being due to human agency, after all? He looked at his friend. "What an unfathomable old hermit," he thought. This man had been the only island of composure in this whole rum business. But now he also had fallen apart.

30

THE REGIMENTAL SATURDAY CLUB

Sir Henry Scott Simpson, an old India hand, was not happy in retirement in England. He had come back from India and held high level, but mundane desk jobs that held no interest for him. The high society life of England held nothing but boredom for him. After the heady years as Governor of a tumultuous Bengal, this life here was too vegetative. Sir Henry was in love with India – the way many colonial British fell in love with India. The red dust of rural Bengal had become part of Sir Henry's blood. Just as he had the Red Blood Corpuscles, RBC, and the White Blood Corpuscles, WBC, he also had BBC, the Bengal Blood Corpuscles in his blood. And something of that blood had remained in Bengal.

And permeating Sir Henry's entire consciousness there was something else: The memory of a scent. "The wild scent of the Sundarbans," he often thought. He longed to smell that smell again. Every morning, in that few minutes of half-asleep, half-awake flight of fancy, he lay in bed and imagined that smell. It excited him. It spurred him into action. And he felt he should turn it into good action.

An idea began to form in Sir Henry's mind. Even in retirement, he could be a material benefactor of India. He could contribute to the welfare of India. He envisioned the tremendous events that would unfold as India gained freedom in the next few years. It was time for good men with true leadership ideas to rise to the occasion. He thought long and deeply about this. He soon had the makings of a plan.

Sir Henry's friends - most of whom were also in retirement - were very powerful people with contacts in the Government at the highest levels. When they asked for a favor, it was given. Such was the friendship in such circles. Great events could take shape in the casual atmosphere of brandy and cigars.

By careful probing and slow persuasion, Sir Henry eventually enlisted four of his friends to form the Regimental Saturday Club. There was nothing unusual or suspicious about this - many old India hands formed such associations to companionably recall the days of great adventure. No one, not even the SIS, ever suspected the club of having a secret agenda. The club would meet occasionally in some country estate or castle over a weekend. Just the men. Wives were not invited, and they did not care to join such 'juvenile' outings either.

On such a weekend in a castle in the summer of 1943, Sir Ronald was reporting on an assignment he was given to research. "We expect India to be free in 1947. The leadership situation of a newly freed India is now coming into focus. There are essentially two contending leaders: Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose. They have a great deal in common: They were both born into wealthy, cultured families. Both are highly educated, and also educated in England. Both are intellectuals. Both are highly intelligent and highly articulate. Both have great charisma.

"Now to the dissimilarities. Nehru is a philosopher, Bose is doer. Nehru is nonviolent, Bose believes in violent overthrow of the British Government in India. Nehru has demonstrated his ability to court

arrest at street demonstrations, Bose has demonstrated his ability to fight the British upon raising a professional army himself. We have discussed the two men extensively among us, and we have decided that for the strength and the nurturing of a newly freed India, Bose would be the better choice. You would like to add something at this point, Sir Henry?"

"Yes, thank you. Bose's rise to leadership took place right in front of my eyes when I was posted in Calcutta. I watched him with great interest. He is a good man. He has made wrong choices from our point of view, taking up arms against us and allying himself with our enemies. But what good man would not try to defend his country any way he can? The point is, he does not have to be good for us. He has to be good for India.

"Now, we may be concerned about meddling in a democratic process. Why should not the people of India choose their own leader? Why should we meddle? The reason is simple. Gandhi is already meddling in the democratic process. He has already once shunted out a duly elected Subhas Bose as the leader of the Congress, through some machinations, with the ulterior motive of providing Nehru an uncontested field. But so great is Gandhi's position in India that people are not able to see through him, or do not want to see through him. In other words, the cards are being systematically stacked against Bose. Back to you, Sir Ronald."

Sir Ronald continued. "So what is needed now is to ensure that Bose is present in free India as a viable leader to be considered by the people of India. That is as far as we want to go. It is not that we want to change the course of history, but we do want history to have as free a course as possible.

"Now, the British already tried to assassinate Bose two years ago through an executive order. We do not know what the status of that order is today. As we see it, nothing could be more beneficial to India at this stage than for someone to ensure the safety and the survival of Bose. That is the specific project we are considering now. We want to save Bose harmless *from the British."*

"Is there a specific plan at this point?" asked Lord Warren, removing the pipe from his mouth.

Sir Henry answered. "As you know, my boy has finished at the Royal Military College, and is now in the Army - headed for India. I have discussed Bose with him long enough and thoroughly enough that he sees our point also. If he could take charge of the entire Bose matter and take it away from GHQ India, then he could also ensure that no harm came to him through any British agency. Basically Harry would propose to keep Bose from harming British interests, but would convince the Government that Bose did not need to be eliminated.

"But since he is my son, I cannot move in his behalf. We need one of you to speak to the PM and have him appoint Harry as his own special man in charge of the entire Bose affair, reporting directly to the PM. No one in the GHQ should know about this role. They and the SIS should be asked simply to drop the Bose matter. That is the best way to implement this plan."

"But if Harry is in the Army, how would he circumvent the military chain-of-command in India, as he will have to?" asked Lord Devenish.

Sir Henry replied. "I think there is way, if Harry and the other person concerned will agree. As you all know, Harry is engaged to be married to a royal lady. This information is now well known. So Harry could pretend that he is above it all - he could sort of lord it over everything ... and develop a haughty, arrogant persona. He could go straight to Waverly if he wanted something, bypassing Oakenlake altogether. That way he will be able to work independently. Let me see to that. But who will convince the PM?"

"Glad to do it, old boy," said Lord Warren, puffing contentedly. "Consider it done."

"Is everyone agreed on the plan?" asked Sir Ronald.

Everyone nodded. But now General Sir Michael Rutherford slowly emptied his glass of port in a fashion that was the precursor to his making a statement - like clearing one's throat. "Let us keep in mind that the boy will be already in harm's way in India, given that he is the son of an ex-Governor, a fact that has been widely publicized during all the talk about his engagement. But this Bose affair is also fraught with danger. It is not only the British who want to eliminate him. I want the boy to have some protection. Any ideas in that regard?"

Everyone seemed to take the point, and ponder it. At length, Lord Devenish spoke. "I just heard that old Carruthers' boy is also going to India. May be we can make a perfectly innocuous suggestion to Carruthers that the two boys look after each other. But then we need to find a way to keep them together in India."

"I will send a message to Waverly," replied Sir Michael.

As a waiter came in to refresh the glasses of port, he saw five very distinguished-looking gentlemen smoking and laughing and reminiscing about India in great bonhomie.

31

CAPTAIN CARRUTHERS ARRIVES IN LONDON

In August of 1947, a few days before India would become independent, Capt. Carruthers was ordered back to London, and told to report to a Brig. Gen. Horner. When the Captain was ushered into the General's impressive office, he saluted. But the General, quite uncharacteristically, walked around from behind his desk and shook his hand: "I am pleased to meet you, Col. Carruthers. Congratulations on your promotion."

"Sir, there must be some mix up. I am Capt. Carruthers."

"There's no mix up, Jim. Your elevation to Major was already processed in India. But we received a message from the PM that he had received a suggestion from a certain high place that you deserve a higher rank. Field Marshall Oakenlake has approved this. So you are now a Lieutenant Colonel – like it or not."

"This is all very sudden, Sir."

"Wait, there's more," the General reached into his drawer and brought out a sealed envelope made of exquisite paper, and embossed with that very impressive gold seal.

"Here is an invitation I have been asked to extend to you. I suggest you accept it. Now, how about some tea?"

Afterwards, Col. Carruthers sat down in the office he was given at the HQ, and tried to absorb all that had happened. He then called the RSVP number and was asked by a secretary to come to tea that very afternoon. The Colonel had just enough time to go to his temporary lodgings, shower and shave, and put on the best civilian clothes he had.

After a very elaborate and ceremonious entry procedure, the Colonel finally found himself in the inner sanctum. The door opened, and he was astounded to face a stunningly beautiful Indian lady wearing a gorgeous sari. But what captivated the Colonel instantly are the eyes, eyes such as he had never seen: deeply and translucently mysterious eyes. She greeted him in a most elegant fashion:

"Good afternoon, Col. Carruthers. Her Highness is expecting you. My name is Champa Wyndmere. I am her aide."

"Good afternoon," is all the Colonel could manage to say.

When he was brought to a sitting area, he saw the royal personage who now stood up. She said: "It is good of you to come, Col. Carruthers. I see you have already met Lady Wyndmere."

"Yes indeed, I have. Thank you for inviting me, Your Highness. My sincere condolences on your loss. I knew the Major for three years."

"It is so sad that the Major had to die so young, and in this way. But Champa has taught me to accept God's will. This marriage was clearly not God's will. But Colonel, we are grateful to you. Lady Wyndmere and I have read the report of the Major's death that you and a police officer wrote. You have handled the matter great dignity and great professionalism."

All three now sat down. The royal lady continued. "Champa and I are sisters. We are the same age, and we grew up together since we were a few years old. She was found walking aimlessly in Calcutta, and picked up by a member of the palace, then in Calcutta. Its a long story, but my parents adopted her, and that is how she became our very own."

"This is fascinating," said the Colonel. Then, looking at Lady Wyndmere, he asked: "Have you been to India since?"

"Actually, I was there last year. But enough about me. Tell us about yourself."

The royal lady interrupted: "There I can help you, Champa. The Colonel is known not to let on that he studied at Eton and Oxford, and that he comes from a most distinguished family. He also writes poetry," and then, looking at Lady Wyndmere with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, she added: "And this handsome man looking like Erroll Flynn is also an unattached bachelor."

"You are very well informed and too kind, Your Highness," said the Colonel.

An elaborate tea service arrived, and the two women busied themselves. The Colonel took this opportunity to go over the Aizawl affair in his mind. As he did so and looked at the women daintily pouring tea into fine china and arranging the knives and forks - the shining knives especially - something came to his mind: A Lady Wyndmere from London visiting Aizawl at the exact time in question. No one connected with the investigation had actually seen her and everyone overlooked her, thinking she was an Englishwoman. Suddenly, in the middle of this opulent, brightly lit setting in the safety of a palace, the hair on the back of the Colonel’s neck stood up. He thought he faced stark horror. He looked at those supple little hands serving little cucumber sandwiches from a tray on to tiny plates, with perfect grace. These very hands - he was now almost certain - had not so long ago lopped off two heads in deep primal jungles of another world altogether. He did not know if this would be an appropriate thing to do here, but he took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. He then took several deep breaths.

"Are you not feeling well, Colonel?" asked the royal personage.

"Thank you. I am fine, Your Highness. Its just a bad habit I picked up from India. Please forgive me."

"Please don't stand on ceremonies, Colonel. Have some tea. And you must have some of these shrimp sandwiches. I made them myself."

"Your Highness likes to spend time in the kitchen?"

"Yes, and knit, and read. Now, Champa is quite the opposite. She practices martial arts, with real swords. Heavy ones. And she likes guns. And she also sits quietly and prays in front of her goddess Kali. We have a beautiful worship room right here."

The brave soldier in Col. Carruthers now took the upper hand. He made a quick mental assessment of the situation. He realized that he had an opportunity here to probe further. He said: "I have always been fascinated by the images of Hindu goddesses. I wonder if I might be so bold as to ask to view the worship room."

"I am sure Champa will be most happy to give you a tour. Now, Colonel, tell us something about your experiences in India."

After about another half an hour, the noble lady took her leave. Elaborate goodbyes were said. She asked the Colonel to come visiting again. Now the Colonel and Champa were alone. Champa said: "Come, I will show you the image of Kali. It was crafted in India by the artisans in Kumartuli, and very carefully transported by a HMS vessel. A broken piece of an image from a temple in India was incorporated when building this image."

The Colonel unlaced and removed his shoes in front of the worship room, without having to be asked. As they entered and stood before the five feet tall image, the Colonel saw what he dreaded he might see. He asked: "Is that sword real?"

"Yes it is, Colonel. It is also quite heavy. So the arm of the goddess had to be reinforced with metal braces inside. I have named this sword Vajrakatana - the Thundersword."

"Is that not a mixing up of cultures?"

"More a harmonizing of cultures. This name will always remind me of three men who mean much to me."

The Colonel made a quick mental count. Yes, three was right. As they were talking, the Colonel was standing quite close to Champa in that small worship room. He smelt her fragrance, and he recognized it as the fragrance of the Indian champa flower. He also saw that a single champa flower – probably grown in the palace hothouse – had been offered to the goddess. He felt he was under a spell – a most beautiful one. He found the courage to say: "I was going to ask you something but it may seem too forward since this is only the first time you have seen me."

"Not the first time, Colonel. You cut a fine figure in a Captain's uniform."

The Colonel put his hand against the wall and steadied himself. There was no doubt anymore. She had taken it upon herself to remove any doubts. She was telling him who she was, and letting him decide how far he wanted to go. He had a choice to leave now, or make a lifetime of this moment. He said: "Is it considered appropriate for an ordinary man to ask Her Ladyship to go out with him the way ordinary people do among themselves?"

"For you, it is," the woman smiled.

"May I telephone you?"

She stepped into the next room and brought him a card: "This is my private number. Please call me any time."

"You are someone the princes dream of. People would worship the very ground you walk on. How is that you would grace someone like me with you company?"

"No one has applied for the position of the prince yet."

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Instead of going to his lodgings, the Colonel returned to his office. He got himself a strong mug of bad coffee from the canteen, and sat down at his desk. He needed to think with a clear head.

He had left behind a group of as fine men as he ever knew - men who were forced into a corner to accept that they were dealing with something supernatural. Now he had the knowledge to relieve them of this burden. Should he close the circle of knowledge? What would come of doing so? The official matter was closed anyway. And those men may have put the matter behind them.

He recognized now that his acting or not acting would alone determine if some men were forced to believe in the superhuman power of revenge-taking. And then he remembered the wink of Col. Aurora. There was a man that knew that some things were being glossed over, but was content not to know what these things were. May be that is for the best.

As he was thinking of these things, another image came to his mind: Major Simpson not only got that brief moments glance at the Plassey Kharga, but he also saw his executioner. It was the closest person to his fiance.

Or was it that those shrewd men in Aizawl knew all along what they were doing? Did they, knowing full well, let a double murderer escape? The Colonel decided this is what really happened.

How odd it all now seemed, now that he was safely ensconced in the "civilized" world of London, thought the former Capt. Carruthers. Several high-ranking government and military officials had collaborated to hush up two beheadings – crimes for which no extenuating circumstances could be proved in a court of law. These people had decided to take the law in their own hands and let the murderer go unpunished. And he, an Englishman, had endorsed all that without asking the obvious questions. It felt so right then. How could they have brought themselves to do this? For Col. Carruthers, there was now an answer. It was the jungle. It had affected him in a deep, deep way that he was thinking differently then. He would not act that way here, in this city of concrete and steel. It had to be the jungle. It *was* the jungle.

The Colonel made up his mind. He would put the matter behind him - for good. Or rather, he would put the jungle behind him - for good. He took out the card from his breast pocket. It smelled of champa. He now made a determination that he could not let anyone else elbow him and get into that prince's open position. With great self-control, he kept himself from calling that number immediately. He must follow decorum, he must allow a decent interval. He would call tomorrow morning.

But before he commenced his social life in England, there was something he needed to do. Something he wanted to do. He would go visit Sir Henry and Mrs. Simpson tomorrow morning, with his hat in his hand and his head held as low as he could.

32

THE FAILSAFE PLAN OF *SECTION YASHIKA*

Tai-sa Matsumoto - Col. Matsumoto - worked for the spymaster Kanyei Chuyo, a chief of Japanese Navy Secret Services, in charge of a section called *Yashika*. He had orders to research any affairs of the British Empire in Southeast Asia and Pacific Area. He charged Col. Matsumoto with keeping tabs on the India-Burma border region that included Lido, Kohima and Aizawl, and also on the activities surrounding the India-Burma Road under construction. This charge naturally included keeping an eye on the activities related to the Indian National Army that had been formed outside of India and was commanded by Subhas Bose – an army that was inimical to the British and friends of the Japanese. Matsumoto had very able agents inside India, including one in Aizawl.

After he heard the account of Uramatsu of how his boys were brutally murdered, the Colonel at first felt an overwhelming sense of sadness, followed by a sense of having failed the four young boys. He was then overtaken by one of the deepest emotions of the tradition-steeped Japanese warrior – the need for just revenge. The Colonel knew that the Samurai felt the same way. But he could not depend entirely on the old Samurai, who might get himself killed before extracting any revenge. So the Colonel needed a backup plan.

His mind started formulating a plan even as he was talking to Uramatsu. He said: "Come old friend, let us have a cup of tea and reminisce on our dear, dear boys".

He took Uramatsu to an inner room where a low tea table sat between two tatami mats. He invited Uramatsu to take off his sash and sit comfortably. As the maid was busy preparing the tea, they started talking about various anecdotes, mostly comic, on the doings of the young lads. The Colonel absentmindedly toyed with the Inro attached to the sash. He asked Uramatsu if he could open it and take a look inside. The latter nodded. The Colonel put his finger inside the box and felt it. He now was sure he had the dimensions of the box. As soon as the Samurai left after elaborate leave-taking, the Colonel measured his fingers and wrote down the inside dimensions of the box.

Within two days, the Colonel quickly found out from his man in Aizawl that the raid was led by one Maj. Simpson, with the Assam Rifles. The agent had further heard from the spy grapevine that the Major had a vested interest in keeping Subhas Bose alive. Colonel Matsumoto asked his man to probe a certain aspect of this further, and report back to him. The man then quickly came back and said that the loss of Subhas Bose would be a serious loss of face for the Major vis-a-vis some very important people in England. For Colonel Matsumoto, loss of face was worse than death. He pondered that point a while. Then he went from one part of Tokyo to another, talking to a number of his shadowy colleagues.

The next day, August the 4th, 1945, he traveled across the town to an army hospital where a young nurse named Sumiko Yajima worked. She was an English-speaking nurse trained to treat POWs. Her teenage brother had worked for the Colonel. The two had a long chat, and the Colonel promised her that he would return with the object next day. He then asked his driver to take him to a super secret Navy research laboratory. The Colonel identified himself and showed his warrant – indicating the

highest level of security clearance. He then asked to meet with physics and medical research staffers. A small group was assembled for him in a conference room. After they heard what the Colonel wanted, they said that for something like this, the laboratory would need an order from the office of Prime Minister Tojo himself. Now the Colonel appealed to their Japaneseness: "Look my friends. Our nation's warlike days are over. One way or another, we will soon be brought to our knees. This special stash that you are accumulating and planning to make into the doomsday weapon will be completely useless. I know you have not been able to gather enough material to make bombs. But you have some. At least let us put a tiniest bit of it to good use. If you cannot give your nation the gift of thousands of dead enemies, give her at least one death."

The scientists remained silent. Then their leader, using a combination of hand and facial gestures, said silently: "Go on." The Colonel went to the blackboard and gave them the dimensions of the box. Then one of the scientists drew a sketch of another, slightly smaller box. He wrote that it had to have a thickness of at least a quarter of an inch. He then wrote Lead next to the box. The Colonel took notes. He then asked how big the "sample" would be. Then they indicated on the blackboard: The size of a small pearl. The Colonel said he would drop by for a cup of tea next day. He next asked his driver to make two more stops before returning home.

The following day, the first stop was at the metal smiths. The box was beautifully done, with a tight fitting lid. At the Burmese jade factory, the tiny Buddha was ready. It looked exquisite, as if carved with extra care and love. The Colonel checked that it had the hole drilled in the back – a hole into which a small pearl could be inserted. He checked that the image fitted neatly inside the lead box. He then asked to have small amount putty used by the carvers to repair and fill cracks in jade. The Colonel did not forget to thank the metal smith and the jade carver for their service to the nation, as he bowed deeply.

At the Navy laboratory, they took the box from him without any words, and sat him down with a pot of tea and some rice crackers. About an hour later, they returned, and handed the lead box back to the Colonel. They wrote on the blackboard that the box was not to be opened again until the sample was to be "deployed". Nothing was said, but deep bows were exchanged.

At the next stop, the object was delivered to nurse Yajima. The Colonel explained to her the philosophy of failsafe plan at the Section Yashika. The person entrusted with the first level plan must not know about the existence of a failsafe plan. So there had to be a second person put in charge of the second level plan. That person naturally had to know that he was the second layer. The very intelligent Sumiko Yajima understood. However, the Colonel, true to the philosophy, did not tell nurse Yajima about the second backup plan. The Colonel and the nurse exchanged bows and took leave. He now asked the driver to take him to a certain kimono shop. There he bought the finest, most expensive snow-white kimono they had.

When they arrived home, the Colonel hugged his driver who had served him long most warmly. The man became stunned at this uncharacteristic gesture. Was the Colonel leaving his job? Unsure, he bowed and Colonel returned this with an even deeper bow.

The Colonel now bathed most ceremoniously, with fragrance added to the water. He then put on his new kimono over his naked body. He knelt down in front of the small Buddha altar he had in his house, and prayed. He then apologized to the four boys, and then to the Emperor. He put his revolver to his temple, and fired. The snow-white kimono started to become soaked in red that spread in vivid contrast.

The next day - one day after the one-death Japanese device was dispatched – the myriad-death American device fell on Hiroshima.

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The event in Nagasaki on August 9, 1945 would have thwarted the first layer of the three-layered plan of Section Yashika completely. But miraculously, Uramatsu survived. All three layers remained intact. One of the greatest tumults in the history of man could not thwart the dead Colonel's plan.

Major Simpson was sauntering in the shopping district of Aizawl on a Sunday afternoon, as he often did. Presently, a shaved head, orange-clad Buddhist monk stood before him and stared into his eyes. The Major had not expected to see a female Buddhist monk in this rugged frontier of India, and was very surprised. But she was also disarmingly charming. She said: "Saheb, I sense that you are in grave danger. Lord Buddha can help you."

"What danger and how can Buddha help me?"

"Come. Let us sit down."

They sat on the porch of a tea stall. The Major ordered tea for two, but the monk asked for a glass of green tea instead. The shop did not have any, and so she settled for regular tea without milk or sugar. The monk continued: "Saheb, as soon as I saw you, I had a premonition that you would be the target of some type of revenge. But if you want my help, you must do everything I tell you without question. I will help ward off all danger. Do you agree?"

The Major thought for a moment and then asked: "How much?"

"Oh no. You do not understand, Saheb. We Buddhist monks have no need for money. I am doing this for your sake. This is an act of compassion."

"I will have to hear your plan, but unless it involved me doing any kind of pagan worshipping and goat sacrifice, I agree."

"Saheb, I will have to meditate for you and see if I can get an answer. Please meet me here at this time next Sunday. And thank you for the tea."

In the event, the shopkeeper would not take the Major's money. He said: "Saheb, it is a great honor for me that the monk took a drink in my shop."

This made the Major consider the monk with greater regard. Next Sunday he found the monk and they sat at the same shop and the same table. The monk asked for a glass of hot water, and added her own green tea. She then spoke very quietly: "Saheb, this is what my vision is. In late October or early November there will arrive in Aizawl a very tall Samurai carrying a long sword. He cannot be missed. He will definitely be detained by the police. But if he is not, you will make sure that he is. On his person there will be a small Jade Buddha. You will claim it, and will subsequently always wear it on your person. Always. It will ward off all danger. Goodbye, Saheb."

"Wait! Will I see you again?"

"No, Saheb. I was here only for a week. Providence brought us together. I live in Champhai."

After she left, the Major realized that he was so much under her spell that he forgot to even ask her name. He longed to see her again. Perhaps he would drive to Champhai one of these days. There was now a jeepable bridle road.

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On the late evening of August the 12th, 1945, three loud and drunken men entered a Geisha House in downtown Yokohama. They were seated, like any other customers. A few moments later, a Geisha came and escorted them to the inner sanctum, and into a basement room. A dinner service was ready there. The men sat round the low table, completely calm and composed now, with no sign of anybody having consumed a single drop of alcohol. The Baldman, clearly the leader, addressed the other two. "Greetings, my friends. In a day or two, we will be either in deep hiding or in an American prison camp. We will not have the ability to do anything further. So it is necessary to discuss what to do about the project our dear departed friend Matsumoto-san so trustingly gave us.

"Now, when he outlined the project, all three of us had our qualms. His target is considered a valued friend of Japan. But after what just happened, nobody can help Japan anymore. Friendships and alliances have no value whatsoever. So, as far as I am concerned, those qualms are gone. Are you with me?"

"Hai," said the Fatman.

"Hai," said the Thinman.

"Good. Now, we are today at loose ends. The whole military structure is in disarray. Anything we do now would be as a renegade group, and not as a part of the Government. I propose that we accelerate Col. Matsumoto's Third Layer plan and execute it ahead of his primary plans. It would be the same method we discussed, and it will be outside of Japanese soil. I am looking at August the 18th. On August the 23rd, a cover story will be put out to the world. Is everyone agreed?"

"Hai," said the Fatman.

"Hai," said the Thinman.

"Very good," said the Baldman. "Let us drink a toast to Matsumoto-san."

33

THE STORY OF LADY WYNDMERE

Lady Wyndmere and Maj. Gurung settled down in the Government Guest House in Aizawl upon their arrival on Wednesday, September 4, 1946. Immediately afterwards, Maj. Gurung went to make some enquiries in town. By previous arrangement, a vehicle had been placed at the Major's disposal.

Lady Wyndmere, slowly during her travels thus far, had taken the Major into her confidence and explained that she had some personal business to attend to that required discretion. The very professional officer understood, and did not say much. He followed every instruction without hesitation, and seemingly, without curiosity.

The Major had hired a scout to take them to the ruins early the following morning, Thursday. The scout had told him that civilians were forbidden to go there, but the Major assured him that he would accept responsibility and that there would be no problems. They set out early in the morning. Lady Wyndmere wore her sari as she always did, but wrapped it around her in a tight fashion - the way Bengali village women did when they worked in the field. She also wore tennis shoes. As they started their trek, the talkative scout apologized for charging a premium rate, because of ‘the present situation’.

Asked what that was, he gave a very full account of the horror that had befallen the place. Lady Wyndmere asked several questions, and the scout answered most elaborately. In answer to one question, the scout said: "Anybody that chooses to live up there in the ruins will die for sure."

When they arrived at the ruins, there was nobody there. The door to the intact portion of the ruins opened upon the slightest of pressure. They faced the image of Kali, with a huge kharga shining in her hand. They examined the rest of the quarters. Then the well-trained SIS man reported: "It appears that two people live here – a man and a woman. From the looks of things, the woman has not been here a while, and the man is not living a methodical life."

The more Lady Wyndmere saw, the more she despaired. As they were exiting the quarters, she saw what she had missed the first time. At the foot of Kali, a small black-and-white photograph – seemingly torn from a group photo – was propped up. It could be photograph of the Lady herself. Round the photo a floral wreath, now withered, was placed. In front of the photo were half-burnt incense sticks. Her sister was dead.

When they returned about noon, the scout was paid a substantial tip and told not to tell anyone of this hike. On returning to the Guest House, Major Gurung called Maj. Simpson and introduced himself as Mr. Gurung, an attendant to Lady Wyndmere. He then handed the phone to the Lady. Major Simpson was most surprised, and also most happy. He agreed to come immediately to the Guest House for lunch.

After effusive greetings and some reminiscing, the Lady and the Major sat down to lunch. Now the Lady said: "Major, I need your help. I have come here looking for my long-lost sister. I understand

that she lives in some ruins up on the hills where they are setting up a Kali Temple. By 'they' I mean she and her male companion - a Kapalik, a devotee of Kali. They go by the names Sapnabhairavi and Vajraninad. I do not know any specifics as to which hill, which ruins, etc. Could you help me find them, please."

"Lady Wyndmere, this is not a problem at all. Let me make some enquiries. I am sure with the description you have given, finding them should not be that difficult. Aizawl is a small place, and the military keeps close tabs on the happenings here. However, are you up to a fairly difficult hike?"

"That is not a problem for me at all, Major."

It was agreed that the Major would get back to her, and then personally escort her to the place. The Lady then went into the town and bought a woven flower basket made of bamboo skin, and fresh flowers to half-fill it. Early in the evening, she dressed in a simple sari, asked Major Gurung to drop her off a few blocks from the DC's bungalow, and wait for her.

A few days passed, with Major Simpson reporting each day that he was getting close. He came around often to visit, and to take the Lady to see nearby sights. Then on Tuesday morning he called to say that he had located the ruins, and they could go up there the following day, Wednesday. Meanwhile, the Major could show the Lady some interesting parts of the town that evening. The Lady agreed. However, in the late afternoon, he called again to say that the plans had changed. His informants had reported that the people in the ruins were never home during daytime. The only way to find them was at night. So, if the Lady wanted, he could take her that very night. The Lady asked him about any dangers in the jungle at night. But the Major said it was perfectly safe. Because it was one night before Full Moon, the hill would be brightly lit, and the hike could be quite pleasant. Also, wild orchids had bloomed in abundance. The Lady agreed.

She explained to Maj. Gurung that this was something she had to do alone. Major Gurung, without comment, offered her his revolver. The Lady declined, saying that this might compromise her position. The Major said he would shadow them as far as they traveled in a vehicle, so that he would at least know which hill they went to and which way they went up the hill. The Lady agreed. As before, she wore her sari in a tight fashion, and carried her tennis shoes in a tote bag to change into before commencing the hike. The Major picked her up at the appointed time in his military Jeep. He asked where her manservant was, and she said she had given him the evening off.

The Jeep was parked at the dry streambed. The Lady changed into the tennis shoes. Now the moon was coming up, and there was considerable light. The hike began.

34

THE NIGHT OF FATE

As they neared the ruins, Lady Wyndmere had a vague sense that they were being stalked by someone in the jungle, traveling parallel to them. But the jungle was too dense to see anyone that wanted to stay out of view. When they came within the view of the ruins, they saw that the door of the hut was ajar. Major Simpson said: "Your Ladyship, you had best wait here for a moment behind the tree line while I have a look at the hut to see if everything is safe."

The Major took his revolver out of the holster and approached the ruins. He stood at the door, looking inside. At that moment, the Lady saw – to her complete confusion – a man approach the Major from behind and hit him on the head with a large rock. The Major fell forward. As the Lady started to go to the Major's rescue, she heard a noise right next to her, and turned. The hideous monster the scout spoke of was standing behind her, and the sight caused her to nearly faint. Had it not been for the fact that the scout had given her the most detailed of description of the monster sightings, she would have fainted now. But she was mentally prepared for whatever horror would appear before her, and prepared also for the stench which now nearly overwhelmed her.

The monster stood in front of her, and bowed low. He had his sword in the scabbard, but in his left hand he was carrying a crescent moon kharga. He was carrying it by the blade, perhaps so as not to smear his ooze onto the hilt. He offered the hilt to the Lady, who took it. Then the monster stood erect, and took a few steps back. Before the Lady could understand what was happening, he drew his sword. He then gently ran the tip of the sword diagonally across the Lady's torso, and then pointed to himself. Next, he ran the point of the sword horizontally across the Lady's neck, and pointed to her and to the kharga. He sheathed the sword as swiftly as he had drawn it.

The Lady understood completely. He was proposing a joint execution. She decided she could put up with this rotting, walking corpse for a little bit. Something now came to mind. Before coming to India, the Lady had informed herself as much as she could about Maj. Simpson. She recalled his vanquishing some Japanese soldiers on the hills of Aizawl. A swordsman herself, she had recognized the Samurai sword and the Samurai way of sheathing and unsheathing the sword. She could only conclude that this was another revenge for another atrocity. She bowed slightly, and monster bowed even lower. He signaled that she follow her.

After it was all over and the monster carried a sleeping Vajraninad from the execution ground to his room, Lady Wyndmere wondered if this creature was the killer of her sister, and if she should destroy it. Almost as though he had read her mind, he removed his sword and put it down on the ground. He then knelt down and offered his neck for execution. The Lady considered the situation for a second, and then laid down the kharga. The monster got up, picked up his sword and with a last bow, vanished.

The Lady saw that Vajraninad was still deeply asleep. She kissed him on the forehead. She found a bed-sheet to wrap up the kharga. She took a few pieces of the broken image of Kali, and wrapped them along with the kharga. As she hiked down, the dark started to dispel. She felt in her skin an

unmixed peace drizzling down on earth. She felt the stark contrast of this morning to the violent night she just came through. She remembered a fragmentary sentence she read somewhere recently: "This is the hour the hermit wakes."

The hike was uneventful except that she had to dodge a group of people coming uphill. She went deeper into the jungle and observed the group as they passed. She admired the handsome British officer in Captain's uniform, and felt a little extra soft towards him – probably because of what happened to another British officer the previous night. As the party passed her location and she thought it was safe to move, that orange-clad monk for some reason turned and looked in her direction. For an instant their eyes locked, and it seemed that some message was exchanged. The monk pretended he did not see anything, and continued on his way.

Lady Wyndmere found that the key to the Jeep was left in the ignition. When she pressed the self-starter button, the engine started. She was glad not to have to use the hand-crank. She left the Jeep at the boundary of the town and walked the rest of the way to the Guest House. It was now early morning. Before she entered, she held the long package parallel to her body and under the spare end of her sari. She held it in place with pressure of her whole arm, at the end of which dangled her regular shoes. She calculated that anybody observing her enter would look curiously at the dangling shoes, and not notice the bulge under her arm. As she entered, the desk clerk greeted her: "Good morning, Your Ladyship. I hope you have had a nice morning walk?"

"Yes, very nice. Thank you."

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Foremost among Lady Wyndmere's thoughts now was the last exhortation of Vajraninad after he told her who killed Sapnabhairavi. He said: "You are now the custodian of the kharga. Remember the ivory knob is reverse-threaded."

Directly after she washed the kharga and wiped it with a towel, Lady Wyndmere tried the reverse-threaded ivory knob. She applied clockwise twisting force, but the knob did not budge. The knob had a hole in it below the neck of the lion, like an eyebolt, through which a pencil could be passed. Lady Wyndmere tried twisting the knob with a pencil, and it yielded smoothly. There was a rolled parchment inside. She pulled it out with a pair of tweezers from her toiletry box. There was a lacquer seal on the roll, completely intact. She broke the seal and unrolled the parchment. Inside was another similar parchment, similarly sealed. She broke that seal, and read the two parts.

Afterward, Lady Wyndmere laid the two-part parchment flat on her desk. She then took out her British passport from her drawer, and laid it next to the parchment. She stared at them for a long while. At length she got up, crumpled the parchment pieces, placed them in an ashtray and set them aflame. It started to smell, so she put the ashtray on the balcony. When she smelled the molten lacquer, she said to herself out loud: "I am forever rid of my nightmares."

She came inside, pressed the passport against her heart for a brief moment, and put it back in the drawer.

Late afternoon the same day, Wednesday, Lady Wyndmere sat near her picture window, and took out some folded handwritten sheets from an envelope. She read them perhaps for the fiftieth time.

35

A LETTER FROM SAPNABHAIRAVI

My dear Lady Wyndmere:

Please forgive me if I am not addressing you in the proper form. Also, I hope that your name and the name of the palace will be sufficient for this letter to reach you.

My name is Shampa Chatterjee. I am the daughter of Late Anirban Chatterjee and Late Kamala Chatterjee. I feel certain that you are my long-lost twin sister Champa Chatterjee who disappeared on a night in 1924 during the commotion surrounding the killing of my father by the military, who suspected that he was a terrorist. I will explain the basis of my believing that you are my sister later. In April of 1945 my mother was killed by the military during a raid on a Kali Temple where we lived. I wish I were writing this letter to only to try to reestablish contact with you. But there is a situation here that compels me to beg for your help.

The head priest of the Kali Temple, Guru Vajravahan, was a most kind man who gave us shelter when we had nowhere to go. He practically raised me. All the other inhabitants of the temple were as close to us as any blood relatives. All of them, all completely unarmed and helpless, were brutally murdered on that night. I escaped because I was visiting a friend's family in Calcutta.

An Indian soldier, Havildar Sachindranath Haldar, had to reluctantly participate in the raid, but refrained from hurting anyone. Sachin-da, as I called him, was well known to us as he had been coming to the temple often. His business brought him to the area. It was he who later came and begged my forgiveness and let me know in strict confidence that the British officer who personally murdered Guru Vajravahan and ordered the killing of the others was one Major Harry Simpson.

Sachin-da also told me the details of the last moments of Guru Vajravahan. First you should know that the goddess Kali in that temple was considered a highly awakened deity, and she held in her hand a real kharga, or sword, that was famously known as the Polashi Kharga. The Major wanted the kharga as a trophy, but it had disappeared when he arrived. Before he angrily and sadistically killed Guru Vajravahan, the latter promised the Major that he would see the kharga one more time, before it sliced through his neck. The Guru told the Major that the person wielding the kharga would be someone already known to him. Sachin-da also told me that the Guru's younger brother – also a Kapalik, named Guru Vajraninad – who lived near Sylhet was most likely to have received the kharga that had been smuggled out.

Naturally, I concluded that I was the one to avenge all these deaths and the desecration of the goddess. I moved to Sylhet and arranged to accidentally meet Guru Vajraninad, and even took up with him. I was united with the Polashi Kharga. And now I had to locate this Major Simpson.

Either by a strange coincidence, or more likely because this Major had tracked down the sword to Guru Vajraninad, he met me. Ever since then, he kept coming to our ashram on a daily basis. Whenever he thought no one was looking, he kept hypnotically staring at the kharga. It was by now

installed in the hand of a newly made image of the goddess. However, for some reason the Major did not steal the kharga, and I had not yet found the opportunity to take revenge. I secretly practiced wielding the kharga, slicing it through gourds and pumpkins propped up on poles.

While I had taken up with Vajraninad on a pretext, and while he was considerably older than I, I came to love him most dearly and to take him wholeheartedly as my man. The Major did not like this at all, and he kept professing his deep love for me whenever he found me alone.

One day he appeared drunk when he came, and started professing his love. He said he knew a Bengali woman in England that looked exactly like me in every respect, and was named Lady Champa Wyndmere. She was found as a child loitering aimlessly in the streets of Calcutta. He guessed the year that happened, and it was 1924. This left no doubt whatsoever in my mind that this was you.

One day when Vajra was away, the Major forced himself on me. I did not have the heart to tell Vajra, who trusted everyone implicitly. The Major did this several more times, until it became clear that I was pregnant. Upon hearing that he became very distraught. He said this could ruin his family name completely. He urged me to abort the child.

Even though the child was ill-begotten, I could not bear to destroy him. So I begged the Major not to insist on that course. A few days later he made a proposition: Vajra and I were to disappear from the view of the society so that the pregnancy would never be known. When the baby would be born, the Major would adopt him as his child and welcome him to the British nobility. If I agreed to this proposition, the Major would take care of everything. There was nothing to be afraid of.

The proposal was this: Vajra and I would move to a secluded hilltop outside of Aizawl where there were some ruins, and within it, some livable quarters. Vajra could occasionally hike down to the village at the foot of the hill, and buy provisions. The Major would even see to it that the image of the goddess was carefully moved and installed on that hilltop.

Vajra liked the idea of a secluded paradise, and did not need any convincing. Then, a few days ago, I told him of my pregnancy. He was silent for a long time, and then said that it was not my fault. He said it was his fault for not protecting me. He asked my forgiveness.

My dear sister, I am very afraid that this plan is not about the child being born out of the society's view, but about the Major positioning us for slaughter. Since he cannot kill us in a military combat situation, he has to do this carefully. He has to do this in a way that cannot be traced to him. And this is the reason for my writing this letter.

It is ironic that both our parents have been killed by the British, and my unborn child and I will probably suffer the same fate, and yet you are now a British noble lady. I am so deeply and so truly happy for you. It is probably very cruel of me to drag you into this. If so, please forgive me and ignore this entire matter altogether. Nothing will be held against you.

If I should die and Vajra should live, he would be devastated. He might take his own life or he may lose his sanity. The only person who can save him then would be our dear, dear friend Meghaswami.

He is a prominent citizen of Silchar and can be easily located. However, we believe he is ashamed of his association with us. It is because in the society's eyes we were not moral people. Because the Swami was associating with us, a rift developed between him and the monastic order he belonged to in Sylhet. We heard that he had left the Order, and moved to Silchar. He never came to say goodbye, and never contacted us again. We were heartbroken over this. But if he were somehow apprised that his friend was in trouble, I am sure he would come to the rescue.

And now to the matter of the promise Guru Vajravahan made to the Major. It is not clear I will be able to keep this promise. And another thought occurred to me. The Guru had told the Major the he would die in the hands of someone he already knew. At that time the Major did not know me.

My dear sister, how I wish I could see you now and hold you and braid your hair and work champa flowers into the braid - like I used to do when we were children together. Although we are the same age, we pretended that you were the younger sister, and I was to take care of you. How I wish I could see you just one more time, see how you look all grown up. But fate has different plans for me. If Ma Kali wills, we will meet again. If not, please know that I have loved you every day that I lived.

Here, enclosed with this letter, is a dried petal of a champa flower that was offered to the goddess of the Temple in Bengal. Please wear it in your person always. It will save you from all harm, and keep you always surrounded by my undying love.

Yours in Ma Kali,

Shampa

Lady Wyndmere slowly folded the pages, put them inside the envelope and looked at the mysterious, and now misted green hills through her picture window. Then she said softly: "You are my sister. I will go to the ends of the Earth for you."

She touched the intricately carved ivory pendant that hung from a chain around her neck - the kind of pendant that had a hinged cover and a small compartment. The compartment held the withered fragments of a champa petal.

Two tear drops now appeared. Soon they would become torrents.

36

THE BROTHERHOOD OF TWO LEAVES AND ONE BUD

The brothers Vajraninand and Vajravahan - which were not their given names - became true Kapaliks at heart, but this way of life was originally a cover for them. In their youth, during the college days, they were deeply involved in the freedom movement. In particular, they became close to a unique super-secret group that referred to itself as the Brotherhood of Two Leaves and One Bud. The name derived from how tea leaves were traditionally said to be harvested: In units of the terminal leaf bud and two young leaves next to it. The principals of the Brotherhood were wealthy tea garden owners. They lived mostly in Assam and East Bengal. They had a professional association which met regularly. The business of the Brotherhood was conducted secretly as a side activity during these gatherings.

This group actually was not at all involved in the freedom movement itself. They set themselves up only one goal: Revenge against the British for various atrocities committed in India. Not only that. Theirs was to be a very special method whose main component was that the plans were very long-term. Things were set in motion, and let develop on their own over periods of ten or twenty years without needing any continuing effort. Thus, it was unnecessary for the patrons and the planners to be involved at all once a plan had been 'planted'. Also, a given group of planners knew only about their own plan.

The brothers were asked to plan and execute a twenty-year plan, involving placing a deep cover assassin within the very core of the British Government. They were asked to identify the agent. It had to be a small child. For this plan to work, it was necessary to have a custodian in India who would keep the information about the identity, the activation code and the target of this agent. The actual information could not be entrusted to memory, and had to be written down. This writing had then to be secreted and kept. One of the brothers was asked to be the custodian of this, and the other was to be a backup custodian. Beyond them, no other persons - not even the patrons themselves - would know this information. If one brother died, the other brother would become the custodian, and choose a new backup custodian. Of course, the deep cover agent himself would have no idea about all this until he was activated.

When the brothers came back to the group with a complete plan, they said they did not wish to hear any of it, but that the brothers should proceed. They promptly gave the brothers the entire amount of money they asked for. The money was given to them by a principal named Suddhodhan Banerjee, a tea garden owner from Sylhet.

The two brothers were already devotees of Kali. So they decided to become full-fledged Kapaliks, and thus stay in seclusion, out of the society's daily activities. In 1924 they started building the Kali Temple in a deep forest in the Ganges delta of Bengal. The next order of business was to identify the agent. Here, the brothers did not wish to abduct a child, but looked for a suitable homeless "street child." The key word was "suitable."

By a coincidence, a very suitable child from a very fine home ran away, and got lost. The child was found and retrieved. It was then sent for processing to an old Thug who worshipped Chhin'nomosta in the deep of the Sundarbans. He specialized in conditioning people through deep hypnosis and other techniques. This was also an erudite Thug who knew the English language. The Thug kept the child for a month, and then returned it to Vajraninad along with the activation code and procedure. It was decided not to use any elaborate codes or ciphers or other types of riddles, but simply to write out the information in long hand in English on a durable parchment with India ink. Following instructions from the brothers, the Thug wrote out his instructions, rolled the parchment to a tube of specified dimensions, and sealed the free end with molten lacquer. Thus the Thug, and only he, knew what was in that parchment.

The child was never allowed to see the brother Vajravahan. It was now strategically let loose on the streets, to be found by an intended finder. Given the striking bearing and elegant poise of the child – indicative of a good family background – certain assumptions were made as to what might become of the child. The assumptions proved to be correct. In a few months, the child's then current location was learned. It was then that Vajravahan wrote out a second parchment, wrapped it around the first, and sealed it with lacquer. He, and only he, knew what was written on the second parchment.

This is where the preparations ended. Now it was to the custodial arrangements. It was then that idea of the kharga was conceived. Once again, it was decided that very simple technique would be used to hide the parchment.

During this phase, the brothers needed a name to refer to the two-part parchment, and they began calling it the *Samrajjo Lipi*, or the Empire Parchment. The crafter of the kharga had to taken into confidence, but he was given a very different story. It had to do with hiding some very ancient Kali relic in the sword. So he made a secret tubular compartment in the hilt of the sword. This compartment was then capped with an ivory knob at the end of the hilt. The knob was carved in the shape of a lion's head. Accordingly, the Thug had been given the dimensions of his rolled parchment. And now, the time came for employing that simple technique that would keep any other curious persons from getting to the parchment. The craftsman came up with a brilliant but simple technique. The ivory cap would be screwed into the hilt, but it would be a reverse-threaded screw. And thus was born the Polashi Kharga. The year was 1925.

One day a visitor with knowledge of Japanese culture came to visit the temple. When he saw the kharga, he said that the ivory knob looked much like a Japanese Netsuke, only larger. Fortunately, he said it only to Vajravahan – with no one else within earshot. Vajravahan then quickly showed him out of the Temple, saying that the visiting hour was over. He did not want the visitor to go to the next step and ask: "Is there an Inro in the hilt?"

37

THE LETTER FROM MAJOR SIMPSON

My dear Carruthers,

If you have unsealed this letter, then I am now Late Maj. Simpson. You have probably learned, or will learn, things about me. This letter is not to make excuses. I am responsible for many brutal murders, committed under the cover of military action. However, I would like at least someone in this world to know that I never personally killed anyone or anything. It is probably cowardice, but I have never been able to do this. It is thus ironic that I have chosen this profession.

I am guilty of being Dr. Faustus, under the power of the Devil himself.

I need to give you some highly classified information. Please hold it as such.

I came to India on a secret assignment, reporting directly to the Prime Minister. My task was to keep tabs on the Indian leader Subhas Chandra Bose, and to try to execute an order that was issued in 1941 to Special Operations Executive: To assassinate Bose before he could team up with the Germans. As it is well known, Bose did team up with the Germans and the Japanese and raised an army to launch attacks on the Empire. For a long time, the British Government has been deeply concerned about this. And that is why the directive to SOE was put out. However, it proved most difficult to get at Bose. Where many good men failed, I came in.

My father had a great and abiding love for India, and even in retirement, had a keen interest in that nations future. In particular, he admired Bose. Even though Bose made some wrong choices, my father felt that he had the special mettle needed in a leader of a newly freed nation. My father liked to quote from T. E. Lawrences *Seven pillars of wisdom*: All men dream; but not equally. Bose, he thought, was a grand dreamer who dreamed by broad daylight with his eyes wide open, and tried to make his dream real. In contrast, he felt that Bose's contender for the leadership of free India, Jawaharlal Nehru, was an opportunist who courted arrests with the British and tried to develop his credentials that way. At any rate, I resolved within myself that while Bose had to be prevented from harming British interests, he needed to be kept alive and well to return and claim leadership of free India. I thought this was a way for me, from my most ordinary station in life, to make a momentous impact on a fledgling nation.

I had many meetings with the PM in his home. I solemnly promised him that I would neutralize Bose. I also suggested that it was not necessary to kill Bose, only to remove him from the scene. He was not convinced. Then I pointed out that the Americans might not like our assassinating Bose. He immediately agreed. I outlined my rough plan: Bose would be abducted and placed in the safe custody of the Russians until the war ended. While I did not tell the PM that I was being motivated by my father's views and that I had my own agenda, I felt that I had told him faithfully and factually what duties I would perform.

As a part of my preparation, the PM ordered the SIS to give me a full briefing on Bose. During this briefing, I learned something about one Lady Wyndmere, a resident of the palace and a person of Bengali origin. She was found in Calcutta as a four-year old, lost and wandering. She had been fully vetted by GHQ India before her adoption in England. But they learned nothing about her family. The SIS however was not satisfied and had their own investigation going, without the knowledge of the Palace. The SIS was worried about deep cover agents.

The SIS learned that Lady Wyndmere was one of identical twins - daughters of Anirban Chatterjee who was a classmate and friend of Bose in Scottish Church College in Calcutta. Chatterjee was suspected of terrorism, and was killed in a raid on his house. This traumatized the girls, and one of them ran away from home. The other daughter and the mother eventually found sanctuary in a temple in Bengal. The priest of the temple was a friend of both Bose and Chatterjee. At that point, the temple became a suspect as an operations center for Boses activities. The SIS continued to dig further into Lady Wyndmere's past, but the Palace got wind of this. The Head of SIS was taken for a visit to the woodshed. He then came and talked to the agent in charge and told him to shut the project down. That agent told me that right then they were hot on the trail of a society named the Brotherhood of Two Leaves and One Bud. But the Head would have none of this, and project was closed down and the files sealed.

I wanted to personally vet Lady Wyndmere. Therefore I arranged an introduction to the princess she was the closest to. My subsequent falling in love with Her Highness was completely natural - and no deception was involved here. Anyway, there did not seem to be anything suspicious about Lady Wyndmere.

I headed for India. My logical choice was to station myself in Lido, Kohima or Aizawl. I chose the last since it would be the least conspicuous. From here I could establish a network of operatives spanning the Burma border, and beyond. I developed a detailed plan and put it in place. The main element of the plan was that no harm would come to Bose from the British side. I started to develop a plan for abducting and transporting him to Russia. Also, flaunting the connection I had with the Palace, I developed a persona of an arrogant officer with no respect for the chain-of-command. This cover let me operate freely outside of the military bureaucracy.

Soon after I came to Aizawl, I received a letter from a Sergeant Shachindranath Haldar in Fort William. He said he had heard that a Captain Harry Scott Simpson, son of former Governor of Bengal Sir Henry Scott Simpson, had arrived in Aizawl. He wrote that his mother was the Ayah in the Governor’s household, in charge of taking care of me. Upon reading this, I vaguely remembered this lady. Anyway, Haldar expressed a desire to come and work with me. I immediately arranged for his transfer.

I was surprised to see that Haldar looked like an Anglo-Indian. He never spoke of his father, and indicated plainly that that subject was not open for discussion. I found a very reliable and trustworthy assistant in him. But it gradually became clear that Haldar had contrived to gain my confidence. He gradually turned out to be a very treacherous person. After we had gone on a few military operations, it became clear that he was a most vicious and sadistic killer, without any conscience. Even when the

operations did not need applying any force, he turned them into bloodbaths. He had a strange hold over his Indian colleagues – they never stood up against him.

To make things worse, he somehow got wind of my true assignment. Perhaps I spoke carelessly, or perhaps he saw something on my desk. He held it over my head, through very subtle hints. I would sacrifice almost anything to bring this brutal soldier to task, but I could not bear to jeopardize the Bose plan. I had personally assured the PM that I would live up to the confidence he placed in me. And I wanted very badly to prove to my lady that I was worthy on my own right and was not living under the reflected glory of my father.

My parents and I corresponded frequently, although it took a long time for the answer to a particular letter to arrive. I wrote to them about Haldar, and his mother's previous association with our family. My fathers response to this was surprisingly sharp. He thought this situation was fraught with personal danger for me, and that I should take great care. He suggested that I not have Haldar as my associate. By the time I read this letter, my father had already proved right.

First, I will describe the raid against the Japanese on the hill. We found out from aerial surveillance that Japanese Secret Service agents had been operating from a hilltop near Aizawl. We mounted a nighttime raid. The idea was to arrest these agents and press them for information. When we arrived near there, I hung back as it was my practice. I heard commotion, and then, four gunshots placed several minutes apart. Between gunshots I heard intense screams - like the blood-curdling scream that comes from a person being brutally killed. Then, before the very last shot, I heard words - Japanese words that sounded like kesa giri kesa giri … A little later, Haldar called out and reported that it was over. I went forward to look, and found four very young boys lying in the ground in a row. Their chests had been kicked in, and they were shot in the head, execution style. There were no weapons in sight on their person or near them. This was a particularly favorite sport for Haldar. He pushed hard on the ribs until they started to crack. He then enjoyed the screaming, and finally executed the victim.

As I was looking down on the boys, I heard a noise in the bushes ahead of me and looked. I saw a very tall Japanese man looking like a Samurai stare directly at me. I realized now that I was standing there alone, revolver in hand. He would surely have concluded that I was responsible for what lay on the ground directly at my feet. The Samurai made a slicing motion diagonally across his torso and then pointed at me. A clear promise he would come for me with his sword.

I considered jeopardizing my secret plan, and bringing Haldar up for Court Martial. But before I could act, he had spread stories about how bravely I had fought and vanquished the Japanese. His stories resulted in military decoration for me, for valor. I did not act immediately to undo this deception, and it became more difficult as time went on. Like a fly I was getting deeper and deeper in Haldar's flytrap.

I took a brief transfer to Bengal to deal with the Kali Temple situation. Haldar went there ahead of time and befriended himself with the residents there. He gained there confidence, and made many visits. He reported that the Temple was a likely outpost for Bose, and we needed to raid this in order to properly search the place. We then made up an excuse to mount such a raid.

The same thing happened with the Kali Temple residents as with the Japanese soldiers. What was to be a simple house search mission was turned into a bloodbath. It seemed that Haldar had no compunction in killing his own countrymen, and even a woman - even when they recognized who he was. Before he went there we talked about the famed Plassey Kharga at that Temple. After Haldar was done with his killings, he came back and reported that the kharga had vanished. Also, nothing connected to Bose was found. He further told me that the priest of the Temple had promised him - before he died - that whoever was responsible for this would die by the kharga. He said the kharga would be presented to this person for a brief moment, before it sliced through his neck. The priest said the wielder of the kharga would someone already known to this person. Finally, Haldar told me that the priest meant me.

With the two death threats of macabre nature hanging over me, I became quite disoriented. I went to see a fortuneteller with Haldar. That man told me that I would die of a strange disease as yet unknown to man. So now there were three emissaries of gruesome death coming for me. From here on, I broke down and became a completely compliant puppet in the hands of the Devil.

Haldar tracked down the Plassey Kharga to Sylhet, and said I should go and stay close to it. That way I would always be sure as to what plans were brewing around it. That brought us back to Aizawl - from where I could make official visits to Sylhet. There – to my shock and surprise – I found the twin sister of Lady Wyndmere. She was called Sapnabhairavi. Of course I did not tell her about Lady Wyndmere being her sister, but only that I knew someone in England that looked much like her. While I had not earlier appreciated Lady Wyndmere's beauty, I was now completely taken by her sister. She was so beautiful, so attractive, so magnetic and so sensual that all my senses were overloaded. I could not bear to stay away from her. Most importantly, it was only her spell that made me forget about the emissaries of death, in procession behind me. Eventually, I forced myself on her, and continued to do so. She did not seem to resist me with any real dislike or disgust the first time. Subsequently, she seemed to welcome me. This was the happiest time of my life. If I now die, I will die a blessed man.

On August the 23rd, 1945 it was announced that Subhas Chandra Bose had died on August the 18th, 1945 in a plane crash in Formosa, near Taihoku airport. His body was never found. The Formosans and the Americans knew that there was no such crash in Formosa on that date or on any date near to that – but they remained silent. Conspiracy theories about assassination of Bose spread apace. As I said, my plan was not to kill Bose. I do not know what happened to Bose. Anyway, Haldar seemed oddly to be happy to hear the news. Now of course he had complete hold of me through knowing the truth behind my being a decorated officer. He no longer needed the Bose secret.

The disappearance or death of Bose was my undoing. After all these confident talks with the PM, I had failed to protect my charge. As to my father, I had failed him and failed India. I had lost my face. I could not imagine how I would ever go back to England and face my father. In a word, I was finished as a man of standing. How would I now return to England? But something else then happened that removed any possibility of my returning ever again.

Around about December of 1945, I contracted a strange disease for which I could find no information. It was the disease the fortuneteller had predicted. I did not want to go to an English doctor and cause

a lot of commotion. I saw an Indian doctor who said I must go to Calcutta immediately and see a specialist in skin disease. I did not do this. The disease was plainly evident on my chest, and I hid this from Sapnabhairavi by always keeping my shirt on. But I am now certain that I will die of this disease soon - if not by other agencies sooner.

In spite of my carefulness in this regard, Sapnabhairavi became pregnant. I learned this in late December. This threw my whole world into a spin. I was resigned to accepting death. I could probably live in shame after my failure with regard to Bose. But I could not in any way accept bringing shame to my parents, and to my fiance – not to speak of my mentor the PM. I could see news headlines on how Sir Henry Scott ' son and would-be royal bridegroom fathered a half-breed in India out of wedlock, with an ashram-living Hindu holy woman. I lost my head completely, and turned to the Devil for help.

At what he said now, I was taken aback. He said he would save me harmless from this situation, but that I could not be choosy as to how he executed his plan. I understood clearly that this meant killings. But then he said that in return, I needed to do something for him. He said he represented certain Indian political interests who would rather that Bose did not return. The extreme elements there wanted to make certain that Bose did not in fact return. Haldar said his people had checked with Formosan and American contacts and found out that there was no plane crash in Formosa on August 18, 1945 in Taihoku or anywhere else. He said he knew that Bose was alive and in our custody. He wanted Bose eliminated.

I now chose to play Haldar's game. I lied and said that Bose was indeed in our custody, and that I could arrange to eliminate him. It was agreed that after Haldar completed his end of the deal in a way that nothing could be traced to me, then I would execute my part of the plan. Haldar said he needed a month in which to develop his plan.

Coincidentally, the monster killings in Aizawl started about the same time. In it Haldar said he saw an opportunity for us. He hatched a plan to save me. Through me, he engineered the move of Sapnabhairavi and her companion to a hilltop outside Aizawl - near the very place where the first four monster killings had occurred. Sapnabhairavi and her companion never saw Haldar. He carefully stayed in the background. It was now a matter of waiting, said Haldar, and all the problems would take care of themselves. Sapnabhairavi would never know that I was responsible for the death of her, her unborn child and her companion.

In mid July this year Haldar told me that Sapnabhairavi, her unborn child and her companion had been killed by the monster. If I needed proof, I could come up to the hill and witness for myself. Of course I did not want to do that. It was a little odd though that these killings were not reported publicly as monster killings. Haldar said he now needed me to complete my part of the deal. I waited for two weeks, and then told him that my part was done. He wanted proof, but he then understood that it was not possible to offer a proof of death. He took my word, and said his people would be most happy to hear the news.

The arrival of the Samurai in Aizawl had left no doubt as to who my Katana avenger was. But a few days before his arrival, I had met a female Buddhist monk in the shopping district of Aizawl. She

said she foresaw that I was in some danger, and assured me that it would be warded off if I wore on my person a Jade Buddha that would arrive with a tall Samurai. I found that Buddha and stole it. I wore it on my person since then, 24 hours a day, every day. Yet the disease came. Yesterday, I suddenly remembered the Samurai interview report. The interview was conducted by you, but the interpreter was one Bhikkhuni Sumi. I did not know what the title Bhikkhuni meant. I asked a Hindu officer and he told me that it meant a female monk. A female monk from Champhai in Aizawl appearing twice in the space of a few days, and both times in connection with the Samurai! Suddenly, everything became clear to me. The Jade Buddha was not to ward off the disease. It *was* the disease. Everybody knew by now what radioactive material could do to you. The female monk was the second avenger.

But who is the third? Who would wield the Plassey Kharga?

The unexpected arrival of Lady Wyndmere presented a problem. I kept stalling her to gain time to figure out what do. How can I take her up to the ruins to meet her sister, only for her to find the gruesome remains?

The planned expedition by the civilian police has now brought everything to a head. I have run out of time. I must act now.

Carruthers, I have always felt that you were acting as my guardian angel, always looking out for me. You wanted to come to Calcutta with me, but I dissuaded you saying that this was only a short assignment. You wanted to know why I was spending so much time in Sylhet, and if I was mixed up is some bad business there. I did not deserve all this caring for. But know this: I have never killed a single man. My mother taught me never to hurt even a mosquito sucking my blood. And yet I am responsible for so many horrendous deaths. Do not feel sorry for me. I am getting my just punishment.

May God forgive me, and I ask also your forgiveness for deceiving you, the finest man anyone can hope ever to know.

Yours,

Harry S.

38

THE TEMPLE OF CHHIN'NOMOSTA

The Temple of Chhin'nomosta, in Bengali lore, is not only a holy place but also on the dark side - a place of indescribable horrors. There was once such a temple in a dense jungle through which railroad tracks ran. The mail train passed there in the dead of night. Legend has it that miles before the train reached this location, passengers who were asleep would wake up, sit straight with their arms tightly wrapped around them, and mentally repeat their chosen god's name. Fellow travelers would nudge one another with their elbows to wake up, without saying anything. It was understood. If a first-time passenger asked any questions, everyone avoided his eyes. It was widely known that if anyone remained asleep during the passage, he might not wake up. Someone or something evil entered the train and was attracted to sleep. No one spoke during the entire time but stayed wide awake, avoiding even blinking their eyes. Several miles after the temple had passed, people would slowly recover, but nobody would be able to go to sleep again. Some chose to travel that route by bus, which did not go near the temple.

No Bengali home with children would ever keep an image or a picture of this goddess at home. Such a thing could implant permanent trauma in a young child. Young boys love to read hair-raising horror stories placed in such temple settings, but they read these stories only by daylight. Not even the bravest dares read a Chhin'nomosta Temple story at night. This boy that was left with the Thug was no exception. And now he was to spend a whole month - day and night - here in a real-life Temple of Chhin'nomosta.

After his mother was out of sight, the boy started weeping convulsively. Then the grotesque face of the old Thug managed a smile. He said: "Oh no, no, boy. You do not understand. We do not want to do you any harm. We do not want you to do anything you do not want to do. We are not like your mother. We will just love you, simply love you. So much so that you will not want to leave this place. Why, about ten years ago a child came here for a month's training and did not want to leave. But leave you will have to. How old are you, boy?"

These unexpected kind words made the boy stop weeping, out of sheer surprise. He replied: "Fourteen."

"And yet you look like a twenty year-old robust, strapping young man. You will do fine. Chameli, my daughter, come and meet our houseguest."

From inside the house stepped out now a young woman - a voluptuous girl of about twenty, with full red lips, plump breasts and a mockingly inviting smile in the corner of her mouth. The invitation in her eyes was even stronger. She stood there, arms akimbo, with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. The Thug resumed: "Chameli will give you all kinds of love. Daughter of mine, take the boy inside and give him some food and water."

By now the boy was too mesmerized to think about anything else but the pleasurable here and now. He ate a hearty meal of Luchis and fried eggplants, followed by homemade coconut sweets. She then

gave him a drink of a special kind of milk which she said would make him feel happy. After the big meal he felt sleepy. The girl took him to her bed - right behind Chhin'nomosta - and asked him to lie down. Then she lay down next to him.

Two nights passed in unmixed bliss. On the third morning, the girl said: "If you want more of that tonight, you must behead the chicken for our dinner."

The boy was shocked to hear this. There was no way he was going to be able to behead a chicken. He took a long, tormented walk in the jungle – a place that had always mollified him. In the end, he came back and declined the offer. But nobody held that against him. They treated him just as nicely.

That night, with him lying alone on the porch, was difficult. He could not sleep. His body felt warm, and it felt as though it needed some type of relief. In the morning he said: "I will prepare the chicken for today's meal."

He got his splendid reward. And so the training went. But the boy felt a little sapped from the nightly activities. The old Thug now produced a translucent orange powder in a small tin can. It had a label in English: Monazite – Thorium mineral, Travancore. It made no sense to the boy. He did not know what Thorium or Travancore was.

The Thug said that this was the chosen medicine of his fellow highwaymen of yesteryear. If the boy would vigorously rub a little bit of this powder on his chest everyday – really work the crystals into his skin – then it would work wonders. The orange powder would make his skin feel warm initially, but eventually it would be source of that special power that he needed at night.

On the second week he beheaded and skinned a goat. Two days later, when he did the same, he was asked to stand n*ak*ed and rub goat blood all over him. He did it and it felt good. Also, his level of reward kept increasing.

The third week it was a buffalo. Then on the fourth week, he was told that his stay was coming to a close, and he should now mentally prepare to leave. The rewards would now stop. The boy was put in great anguish and begged for the rewards to continue. The Thug said: "The only way I can make an exception, and only in your case, is if you..."

The boy could not, and he slept alone that night. But that certain wild smell of Chameli that intoxicated him so much got the better of him. The next morning he asked to borrow a ramda, a kind of machete. He waited till the evening, and then set out, the Thug following a short distance behind. He came to a small pond in the jungle where people from a nearby village came to fetch water. At this hour there was nobody. He waited. At last, a little girl came with a small pitcher. With quick movement, the boy dragged her into the thick of the jungle, ravished her, and then cut off her head. The Thug looked on admiringly. The reward that night was the best the boy ever had.

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When the mother came with the money to pick up her little boy, she saw instead a grown man with a hard face. All the softness had gone from his face. The mother was pleased. She paid the money and the Thug said: "Neither of you is to come here ever again."

After this, a spate of rape-murder incidents occurred in that area of the Sundarbans where the boy lived. These cases were never solved.

A few months later the mother was passing by the house of the Ojha, and thought she would stop and thank him for referring her to the very effective Thug. She told him how the Thug was able to help her to her great satisfaction. The Ojha was pleased, and said: "That is a man who uses his great powers of hypnosis. He can feed you grass and make you think you are eating Gulab Jamun. He can make you sit on a log and make you think you are riding a horse. He can also make you do things."

"And my boy also grew very fond of his daughter."

"What daughter?!" asked the Ojha. "He does not have a daughter!"

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. He never married. The only other inhabitant of that temple is his pet young tigress whom he calls Chameli."

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The boy never told his mother about the "convocation." It was for him and him only. After his month was complete, the Thug said: "In the old days of ashram education when children were sent to a remote forest to live with and learn from a Guru, he always held a convocation for the graduating class. We will do the same for you - and especially for you."

On the evening before the day the mother was to come to pick up the boy, a big feast of fire-roasted goat-meat, roasted onions and garlic, and country liquor was prepared. After the feast, the Thug – thoroughly inebriated – lit his chilam and sat cross-legged on his piri on the front porch. Chameli squatted next to him and kept snuggling up to him. The boy sat on the floor, cross-legged, facing the Thug.

After several puffs, the Thug slowly started swaying back and forth. He was now in the right frame of mind. He began. "My son, there is a very strong calling in our Thugee blood. The British have put an end to our cult and our old way of life. We each now have to find our own new way of answering that call.

"A part of our duty is to take revenge on the British. I have done mine by training a child about ten years ago. You will do yours when you join the military.

"Son, you are a very special person. I fathered you when I was seventy-five years old. You are a new sapling from a very old, dried up and nearly dead seed. You were born by the grace of Chhin'nomosta. Go forth into this world and answer your blood's call.

"And fear not of losing your way. The scent of Chameli will always guide you."

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Some years later when the boy went to join the Army, the military doctor asked him how his chest came to be so discolored. He told the doctor that during the last Holi Festival, a mischievous friend had sprayed him with an indelible paint such as used in tattooing, and that it would take months to go away. The English doctor then gave him a pass in the physical examination. Later, when he was posted to Aizawl, the tumors started slowly popping their ugly little heads.

39

THE EMPIRE PARCHMENT

THE OUTER ROLL

The following concerns a deep cover agent inserted in June of 1924:

Agent name: Champa Chatterjee
Age at insertion: Approx. 4 years
Where inserted: Ballantine Castle, Scotland
Ready for activation: 1945 and later
Intended target: R Britannica

Agent description:

Exceptionally beautiful, fair-complected, black hair, deep black eyes. No visible distinguishing marks, but the eyes have a tinge of mystery which cannot be missed. This is the best identifier.

THE INNER ROLL

Activation procedure:

The agent has undergone deep conditioning. Until activated, she has no knowledge of this. But she may have recurrent dreams and nightmares.

There is a sequence of words to be used for activation. The agent will respond with another sequence of words when activation has been completed, and the agent is then ready to execute any plan given her.

A person should get close to the agent for a period of several days, and repeatedly recite to her the activation sequence, followed by reminding her of her Indianness and her obligations to India. When she responds with the second sequence, she should be given the target.

Activation sequence: *Chameli to Champa sends her best*
Response sequence: *Chhinnomosta spouts deep in the forest*

The agent has been conditioned to favor sports and weaponry, and will be physically able to execute the order.

40

EYES

The fine care and amenities at the Swami's home had quickly revived Vajraninad's health. Early morning each morning the two friends took long walks by the river Barak. Then they sat at a tea stall for their first cup of tea. Then they came home to a sumptuous breakfast. They had naps after the soporific noon rice. There was elaborate afternoon tea. Friends visited in the evening. The plans for a new ashram on the road to Hailakandi were taking shape. Life was methodical for Vajraninad. But his heart did not heal at all. Those eyes did not give him a single moment of peace. His will to leave did not return. He was a sad, sad presence through all of the above.

Vajraninad saw the large framed picture of the Swami's father in the living room. If he recognized, he did not say anything. Nor did the Swami's mother show any signs of having seen the houseguest before now. For the Swami, an invisible question mark kept hovering in the air – following him from room to room. He, and he alone, was going to have to converse with this sign. At some point. "Not everything about this case has been tied up neatly," the Swami thought. If he had helped others end their mental agony, his own had just begun. If for others it was a crisis of faith, his was a crisis of morality: How much revenge can be justified under the noble umbrella of patriotism?

This was now just a few days before Durga Puja - the annual time of worship, festivities, gift-giving, and generally, great rejoicing. The Swami went to the site of his neighborhood puja, the "pandel", and made some inquiries. He asked about the date and the time of a certain event. The boys organizing the puja there told him they would keep the Swami apprised of the impending event.

Two days later the word came early in the morning. The Swami asked Vajraninad to accompany him. Instead of taking the family vehicle, they took a rickshaw and arrived where the artisans were putting the finishing touches to the magnificent, glistening image of the goddess and her entourage. The Swami and Vajraninad stood round with others who had gathered to view the same auspicious event.

The image had been finished except for one detail, the most vital detail: The painting of the eyes. The eyes were left blank. It is only when an entitled person came and ceremoniously painted the eyes that the goddess would be awakened.

The man came, freshly bathed and wearing new clothes. A priest then performed a ceremony to bless him. The priest rubbed some sandalwood paste on his forehead. The whole place now had a hypnotic character: the Sanskrit chants, the smell of fresh flowers and burning frankincense, the cumulous clouds in the sky.

The man now set about his very special business. With a palette in his left hand and very fine brush in his right, he began to apply his strokes. Slowly, two eyes began to take shape. As it happened, everyone present had the sense of a true awakening. Finally, the man was finished. The goddess was made whole.

The Swami and Vajraninad got on a rickshaw - homeward bound. For a long time the two men sat silently and companionably. The Swami in his mind was able to superimpose two sets of eyes, and consider the composition. Then, when he looked again, only the goddess's eyes remained. The other pair was gone, for good. With a glorious feeling of being freed, the Swami asked his friend: "Vajraninad, my friend, does it help?"

Vajraninad answered: "This world all around me that I see with my eyes – this is a most beautiful place. This gift of life that I have been given – this is the most beautiful of gifts. Meghaswami, I want to live. And I want her to live in me."

Eyes by Basab De

EPILOGUE

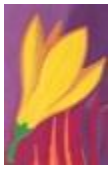
About two months after the rum business, one morning the Swami found in his mailbox a very elegant envelope with London postmark and a most impressive crest embossed in the upper middle portion. It contained a single typed page with four lines - a paragraph of a poem. Above the paragraph, it said: The "peace" paragraph. The Swami immediately brought out his composition book, and arranged in front of him the three paragraphs : Sapnabhairavi's "hermit" paragraph, his own "jungle" paragraph, and now the "peace" paragraph. But he found that the paragraphs did not blend together to make a single poem. Distraught, he went for a walk by the Barak. There he found Luchipuri, the famed 'mad sadhu of Silchar'. Luchipuri was an ascetic loner who roamed the streets of Silchar, the way Diogenes the Cynic roamed the streets of Athens. If the latter curiously carried a lit lantern by broad daylight, Luchipuri carried a walking staff much taller than himself, staff that he did not need. The Swami was one of the very few people in Silchar that Luchipuri deigned to speak to, and even with a tinge of respect.

The Swami invited him to have a cup of tea at a riverside shanty. When the Swami explained what was on his mind, Luchipuri said: "When two things do not match up where they meet, then both must give a little where they meet. Change the end of a paragraph and the beginning of the next, and remove the period. Let the poem flow freely from paragraph to paragraph." As soon as the Swami came home, he followed this advice and found that he was staring at Sapnabhairavi's planned three-author "Ashram Poem".

This is the hour the hermit wakes. Upon
Each night's end as the dew descends from
Its canopy home, and shakes off the smell
Of the dark from its sleep, the mist stirs

As if to greet the arousing light. When
The spent cricket sleeps, and the weary owl
Sleeps, and the noisy brood is not yet
Awake, the only sound is the liquid lilt

Of an unseen rill that rides the mist that
Greets the light. After a frenzied forest
Night of howlings and hootings and stalkings,
Returns an unmixed peace. The hermit wakes.



BACK COVER

ABOUT THE BOOK

Near the beginning of this story set in British India, on the rugged mountain highway at Vairengte in the Lushai Hills, Deputy Commissioner Shamsul Huda Khan looks out on the vast expanse of primitive jungle, and says to his childhood friend the Hindu monk: "The jungle is very old - it is the first sentient life nature created. When you relate to it, you tap into the first life."

Deep in the tiger forest of the Sundarbans, the ancient Thug squats before the Temple of Chhin'nomosta, swaying back and forth in the fullness of a hashish-induced stupor. The British Secret Intelligence Service is closing in on him, but is ordered to terminate the investigation. The old India hands in the Regimental Saturday Club meet in a castle outside London. Little do they know that Section Yashika of the Japanese Navy Secret Services will have its own plan. All such events occurring at different times are on fateful paths that will all converge under the full disc of a jungle moon outside Aizawl. It will the night of nights. Blood will curdle.

Beyond all this and above all this are the watchful eyes of the goddess Kali, and the serene gaze of the Buddha Amida Nyorai. And always and everywhere there is the sweet, memory-wrenching, desire-thickening scent of champa.

Near the end of the story, Lt. Col. James E. Carruthers sits in his office in London and wonders why he did what he did in Aizawl in his official capacity - things that he would never do in the steel-and-concrete civilization where he now sits. "It *was* the jungle," he concludes, and feels absolved.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This is Bibhas De's first book-length fiction. He has published two volumes of poetry. His ongoing collection of stories, *Embellished Memories* and poetry, *Lamasery Wild Berries* may be read on the Internet. There is also a book-length biographical work, *Unfathomable Ray*, on his great uncle Swami Gambhirananda, noted Hindu monk. He is a physicist, and holds a Ph. D. from the University of California, San Diego. For further information, please refer to his web site: *www.bibhasde.com*.

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